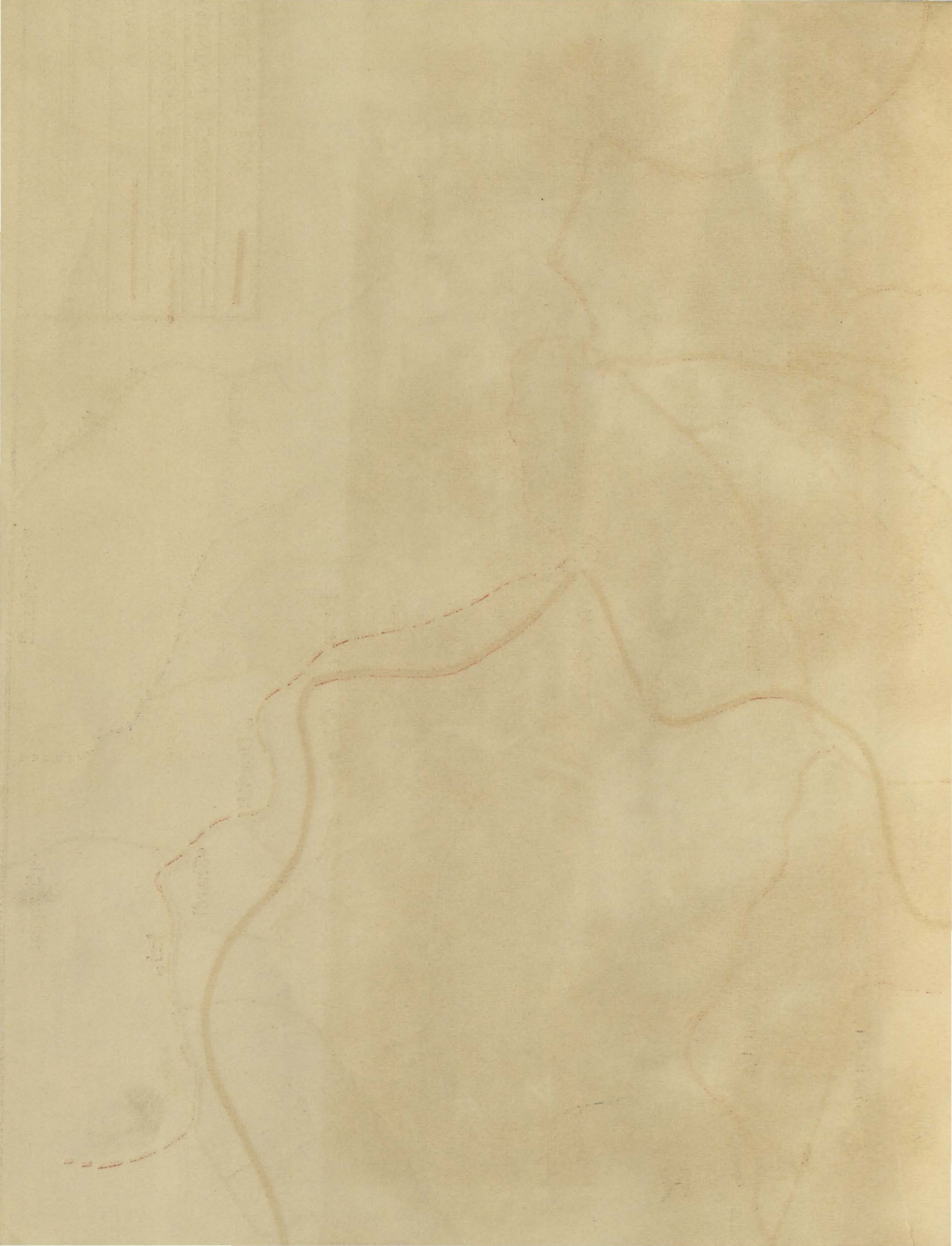
# THE SMILING FACE
## OF
# Azad Kashmir

AN ILLUSTRATED BOOK OF TRAVELS



BY

Rao A. Rashid



# THE SMILING FACE

OF

# AZAD KASHMIR

*by*

*RAO A. RASHID*

With compliments to
Mr. A. V. Shahale.
Rao A. Rashid
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TO MY BROTHER TO WHOM I OWE SO MUCH IN LIFE

## FOREWORD

This collection of photographs by Rao Abdul Rashid Khan is a veritable mirror of Azad Kashmir. In it are reflected its panorama; the beauty of its hills and dales, its roaring nullahs and thick green forests, and its people, simple sons of the soil brought up in the cradle of nature.

The author has served in Azad Kashmir for three years as Inspector General of Police. He is a keen sportsman, a lover of nature, and a good traveller. His duty took him to the remotest corners of the territory liberated from the enemy; elsewhere he betook himself egged on by his irrepressible desire to drink deep from the cup of God's unspoiled creation. His efforts were amply rewarded of which this collection speaks in eloquent testimony.

I am not a photographer myself and the less I say about the technical qualities of these pictures the better. However, I must confess that I have been seldom impressed by the keenness and passion for one's hobby as I was in the case of the author. During my tour of Leepa in November 1960, whither Rao Abdul Rashid accompanied me, the tourist hut in which we had encamped suddenly caught fire one night and was completely burnt down in little over an hour. While everyone, panic-stricken, was running for safety or shouting for help or trying to rescue his belongings, he very calmly reached his camera and took the picture of the blazing hut, the last one in this collection.

I am sure that this collection will be instrumental in introducing Azad Kashmir in all its lights and shades, and remove a great deal of misunderstanding prevailing about these territories in some quarters. I am glad the author decided to publish these pictures which will be warmly received by all lovers of Kashmir and its people.

Muzaffarabad,
30*th November*, 1962.

K. H. Khurshid,
*President*,
Azad Government of Jammu & Kashmir.



K. H. KHURSHID

(An informal picture taken by the author during a trip to the interior of Azad Kashmir)

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It has been possible for me to bring this pictorial out with the assistance of a large number of my friends including a very dear one whose help and advice—and goading, proved invaluable but who insists on remaining anonymous.

While acknowledging thanks, my thoughts turn to late Mr. Zaidi of 'Zaidis Photographers, Rawalpindi', who almost entirely developed and printed the pictures contained in this book. He always prided in doing this work for me and never failed to offer his expert advice on the technique of photography at which art I was just a novice; it was under his good care that I took to it with all the zeal and enthusiasm of an amateur. His tragic death by drowning two years ago deprived me of a warm friendship, an expert advice, and a dependable workmanship.

I am also grateful to Sh. Abdul Qayyum of the Department of Tourism, Azad Kashmir Government, for his co-operation. There is not another man who knows or loves Neelam Valley as much as he does. My record of the Valley was not complete and he readily contributed some of the pictures included in this collection.

I will fail in my duty if, at this moment, I do not recall with deep appreciation the assistance of all the officers and men of Azad Kashmir Police amongst whom I had the good fortune to work for more than three years. Without their loyal and affectionate care my trips to the countryside, and hence this book, would not have been possible.

In the end I express my heartfelt gratitude to Mr. K. H. Khurshid, President, Azad Kashmir, who has written the foreword for this book.

It is perhaps a little known fact that Mr. Khurshid has many loves in life. Politics, journalism, and countryside are the three that I know of, and which I can safely mention here. I had the honour and privilege to share the last one with him. I accompanied him on many trips to the interior of Azad Kashmir and my happiest memories are of those journeys. He is also responsible for initiating and encouraging me in the field of writing and if I have failed in my attempt to convey my real feelings towards him, he has only himself to blame.

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The author being decorated with Azad Kashmir President's Police Medal for meritorious services by Mr. K. H. Khurshid at Muzaffarabad.

# INTRODUCTION

The day next to taking up my new assignment in Azad Kashmir in 1957, I happened to meet a United Nations' Observer at a lunch party in Muzaffarabad, the capital city of Azad Kashmir. He started telling me how he divided his time over the two "Kashmirs" to help maintain an uneasy truce between the two Armies.

"You would not find this part as beautiful as the Valley?" I said to him a little apologetically.

"Well, I am not so sure" he replied after a brief reflection.

I looked at him, surprised.

"You see" he added as an explanation, "There cannot be any comparison. This area has its own charm which cannot be easily surpassed".

Seeing that I was still sceptical, he enquired, "Are you going to be here for sometime?"

"Yes" I admitted.

"Why not try to find it out yourself then?" he advised. And I accepted the challenge.

But finding it out myself did not prove so easy. It took me 3½ years of constant move to know why my friend, the United Nations' Observer, was so uncertain? The answer which I finally got was that there is no dearth of scenic beauty in Azad Kashmir, but it is a beauty of its own type. It is primitive, unspoiled by human hand, awe-inspiring, and like everything beautiful—not easily accessible.

It is because of this inaccessibility of the area that some strange notions are current in the minds of people outside Azad Kashmir about conditions which prevail there. One is that there are some restrictions on entry into the territory. There is no basis for this belief. There are no restrictions and no checks. You are as free to come and go as in and out of your own house.

It is also widely believed that it is unsafe for a visitor to go about in the area. Nothing can be farther from the truth. A Kashmiri by nature is peace-loving and law-abiding. The streets and roads and mountain tracks all over Azad Kashmir are probably safer than in any neighbouring territory; travelling at anytime of the day or night is absolutely safe. There are occasional fire-works across the Cease Fire Line between the troops who have faced each other for over fifteen years now, but a visitor does not normally get anywhere near the danger zone during his sight-seeing trips.

The political aspects of the Kashmir tragedy have, unfortunately, so much dominated the thinking of people in and outside the country that all other aspects, human, cultural, and economic, have been eclipsed by it. While any person anywhere can tell what

main political issues are involved in the problem, and what had been its chequered history during the last fifteen years, very few indeed would know, or have made any effort to know, anything about the luckless human beings whose destinies are involved in it. This set of photographs which I collected during my journeys into the country-side is meant to bring into focus the neglected facets of Azad Kashmir and high-light its physical charms, and its cultural and social life.

If you carefully look at the map in the inside cover, you will find that Azad Kashmir is a very long and a very thin strip of land precariously clinging to the North-Eastern border of Pakistan. While it is 400 miles in length, it is nowhere more than 40 miles deep in a straight line. The "Cease Fire Line" which forms its Eastern military border with "other" Kashmir is perhaps the most heartlessly conceived line on the map of the world. It has cut indiscriminately across houses, homes, families, villages, cultural and geographical entities, and natural—and at times the only possible—means of communications like a butcher's knife. The wounds inflicted by this brutal incision are still bleeding even though tremendous economic, social, and human adjustments had to be made by the poor Kashmiris to overcome its terrible consequences.

Inspite of its being a geographical oddity, Azad Kashmir possesses a great variety of climate, terrain, and human material. A person living in the extreme South has as much in common with a person living in the extreme North as a Negro with an Eskimo. Its 9,00,000 population can be divided into 4 clear cultural and ethnological groups. Starting from the tall, tough, and swarthy cultivators of Mirpur district in the south, the area contains short, stocky, and war-like tribes of Poonch and Muzaffarabad hill tracts, the peace-loving, delicately featured, and peach-complexioned Kashmiris of Karnah and Darawah and, lastly, the Mongolide stock of the extreme North bordering Gilgit and Skardu.

Their various cultures and habits are products of their different surroundings. If the intervening distortions caused by the natural climatic agents are ignored, the entire territory from south to north will look like a side of a big mountain. With the plains of Bhimber in the extreme south as base, the area goes on elevating till it merges in the perpetual snow-lands of Gilgit and Skardu.

Administratively Azad Kashmir (excluding Northern Territories of Gilgit and Baltistan which are being directly administered by Pakistan) is divided into three Districts, namely Muzaffarabad, Poonch, and Mirpur. The people have gone a long way from the chaotic conditions which prevailed during the War of Liberation or immediately after it. Out of the ruin and the destruction and the confusion has emerged an effective, though top heavy, administrative machinery in the person of an elected President, his advisory council, an elaborate Secretariat and departmental set-up—even a High Court. In many respects this set-up, to an outsider, looks downright absurd, when for example one finds three High Court Judges to hear the appeals of two Sessions Judges, and 7 Secretaries to the Government as against only three Deputy Commissioners. But if you talk to a Kashmiri about it, he will stoutly defend it and justify it by advancing a favourite argument which people in Azad Kashmir never tire of citing—and with justification too—that Azad Kashmir more than anything else, is an ideological state. Its set-up, they say, is intended to meet not only the administrative requirements of the people living there, but also the political and ideological aspirations of the entire people of Jammu and Kashmir now artificially divided. It is,

therefore, essential, they argue, to maintain a machinery which can at a moment's notice take over the entire territories of Jammu and Kashmir State in the event of a decision whenever it comes.

In many ways the lot of the people of Azad Kashmir is now very much better than of those in the neighbouring regions. For an area and population equal to that of a very small district of West Pakistan, there are 5 full-fledged hospitals with all the modern equipment and facilities available to the general public. There are three Colleges, one in each district. The road mileage has gone up from a mere 80 miles to 800 miles within the last 14 years. With an elaborate civil Government and a modest Army recruited from and run by the Kashmiris themselves, the scope of employment in proportion to the population is thus much wider now than ever before.

The economy of the area is still basically agricultural. Rice, maize and wheat are its staple crops. People are gradually taking to fruit growing for which the entire area is ideally suited. But Azad Kashmir's real wealth lies in its pine forests. While some of the easily accessible portions of the forests have been over-worked and, in some cases, have even been denuded, it still has a tremendous amount of rich virgin pine forest reserve to tap. Ninety percent of Azad Kashmir's revenue receipts come from this source alone.

The countryside is as rich in fauna as in flora, or to be more accurate, it was as rich in fauna, as it is in flora. The two offences which called for drastic punishment in the Maharaja's time were the cutting of a tree from his forests and shooting of the game in his many games reserves. These were the two fields in which, unfortunately, the people enjoyed their newly-won freedom most. While the Azad Government quickly restored the sanctity of the forest, there was nothing it could do to protect wild animals and birds. After the "Cease Fire" the newly acquired arms were turned from the enemy to the birds and beasts and in a few years time the forests which once pulsated with wild life were all but silent. Only the bear and the leopard and the wild boar are left. The flesh that cannot be eaten is safe. The golden pheasant which is a bird of rare beauty and elegance, and manages to keep itself out of human reach for most of the year, comes under heavy punishment in winters when it climbs down with the snowline and may as well be extinct in the coming years if indiscriminate killing is not stopped.

The people are politically conscious to a surprising extent. During the last elections 87% of voters exercised their right of vote. If the long and difficult distances are taken into account, this is a very high percentage of voting indeed. Even in the very heart of the territory, where any education or an exposure to civilization is not expected, you will find ordinary folks keeping themselves constantly posted with the latest international political developments and will engage you in an enlightening discussion on any such topic at the slightest excuse.

The areas and places famous for their scenic beauty are many. It will take months to see them all as the most beautiful are also the most inaccessible. These can roughly be divided into two categories:

(i) Those which are connected by road of some sort, and where a tourist, thanks to the Government's efforts in the last couple of years, can get a fairly decent accommodation to put up, and

(ii) Those which are connected with foot or pony tracks only, with no other facilities guaranteed.

In the first category come Dhirkot, Rawalakot, Banjausa, Trararkhel, and Polandri in Poonch District, Chikar, Noon Bagla, and Sodhan Gali in Muzaffarabad District, and Bagsar in Mirpur District. The second category includes Neelam Valley, and Leepa Valley in Muzaffarabad District and Aliabad in Poonch District.

All these areas, in sheer beauty and grandeur, can compare with any in the world.

It will be realised that Mirpur District in the south which mostly consists of low hills and flat land does not possess many places of interest. But with the completion of the 35 miles long artificial lake and other allied projects at Mangla, this deficiency is going to be more than made up within the next ten years.

The only thing to equal the physical beauty of Azad Kashmir is the beauty of its people. Simple, brave, always smiling, you come across some of the finest male and female specimen. They live with their misfortune with a stout heart and the only hope of a solution of the problem one can find is in the engaging optimism of these people which is so contagious that when you are with them, you can never for a minute doubt that they will one day have the power and opportunity to shape their own destiny.

The following pages are, I am sure, bound to generate considerable outside interest in Azad Kashmir and its people. Some readers might even seriously think of a visit to the area. Here I must sound a word of caution. Most of the roads in Azad Kashmir are only fair weather roads. Although regular buses are available for almost all the places connected by road, yet, for a person uninitiated in art of travelling in the hills, the journey by bus is, to say the least, very uncomfortable. One should preferably arrange for his own four wheel drive, and a good driver which, if the visitor is not one himself, is a must. Azad Kashmir's roads are notoriously tricky. One particular stretch connecting an army post in Mirpur district is so bad that it has been unanimously voted as the most dangerous road in the world by the United Nations' Observers, who, much to their distaste, have to use it quite often. A story about the road goes that a jeep was once seen coming at dead of night. The whole army detachment came hurriedly out to see the man who had dared it. It was something which had never happened before; even in day time only a selected band of drivers are permitted to drive on it. The jeep finally reached the hilltop and out came a U.N. Observer-dead drunk. He was hurriedly taken in and put to bed. When he got up in the morning, he had no idea how and why he had come and prepared to go. He came out of the bunker, had one look at the road, and asked incredulously, "Is this the road I am supposed to take?"

"Yes" he was told, "Don't you remember, you came by this last night"?

"I will be damned if I do it again", he swore loudly and footed back the entire distance with a borrowed driver following in the jeep.

All Azad Kashmir roads are, however, not so bad. Yet, as I have already said, a four wheel drive and a good experienced driver will keep your blood pressure down. The rest can be fixed by the Department of Tourism, Muzaffarabad, if someone gets in touch with it beforehand.

Even the Tourist Department is not of much help so far as trips to inaccessible areas like Neelam or Leepa Valleys are concerned, which only those who crave for real high adventure should ever attempt. The tracks are tiring and dangerous. When you walk, you wish you were riding. When you ride, you want to get down and walk.

One must also be prepared on these journeys to constantly live with a highly offensive smell which emanates from whatever you eat, or drink, or touch, or pass by, human beings not excluded. Its origin is hard to fix. There must also be half a pint or more of blood to spare for the irritatingly large variety of bugs and lice that nature has let loose in these hills as also the patience to nurse the sores left by such creatures in the bargain for at least a month after one's return. But believe me every moment spent there, inspite of all the hazards, is highly rewarding, the memories of which haunt you ever after.

The last piece of advice which I can offer is that travels in such areas should not be undertaken singly. They are best enjoyed in groups, though not necessarily large ones. I was particularly lucky in this respect. I always found myself in a selected group of tough, cheerful and congenial friends. It lightened the rigours of the journey and deepened its enjoyment. That is, incidentally, the reason why I speak in terms of "we" rather than "I" while recounting my experiences in the following pages.

## MUZAFFARABAD

A District Headquarter in the old Jammu and Kashmir State, it is now the seat of the "Free Government of Jammu & Kashmir"—not so much by choice as by force of circumstances. During 1947-48 when the Kashmir War was on, the freedom fighters had established their Headquarters at "Tararkhel" in Poonch District. After the "Cease Fire", however, a hectic search for a Capital started. Muzaffarabad was the obvious choice. It was one of the two District Headquarters in the liberators' hands. But the other one *viz.*, Mirpur, was completely devastated. Moreover, situated on the famous Srinagar Road, the choice by implication was meant to serve as a constant reminder as to the real objective—Srinagar.

Located in a bowl, it is only about 2,000 feet above sea level. From any standards it is a small, dirty and filthy town. But visitors from the plain are simply fascinated by its "picturesque" surroundings. It is also striving hard to live up to the expectations, and is expanding fast. Starting with almost nothing, it has now a proper secretariat building, a 'President's House' of a sort, a Civil Lines, a Satellite Town, a Cantonment, a Stadium, a College, a 200 bedded hospital and a brand-new bridge on Neelam River. Whatever it is, it is not a show-piece of Azad Kashmir. At the most it is a rude introduction.

The picture on the opposite page is the most familiar view of Muzaffarabad. The snow capped mountain in the background is the 'MAKRA' which is over 14,000 feet high. In addition to serving as an appropriate back-drop to the view of the town, it also acts as a weather guide to the city dwellers and even to the administrators. The first patch of snow on it marks the "official" advent of winters in the Capital. A thin coat during the winter means less water in the spring—a bad year. A very thick coat denotes possibilities of floods.

The city, as you can see, consists of two layers. The bottom layer is the commercial area which centres around "Dhakki" (stairway to the top). Dhakki is the "Hyde Park" of Muzaffarabad. If you stand there for five minutes on any evening you know which way the political wind is blowing. "Dhakki News" is quite a well known and dependable source of information all over Azad Kashmir. All political movements—and there are far too many—start from there and also end there. Many a Government have been made and unmade in the "Dhakki Square".

The top layer is the main town. The wind of change does not blow there. It has stayed as it was; filthy and dirty, calm and quiet.

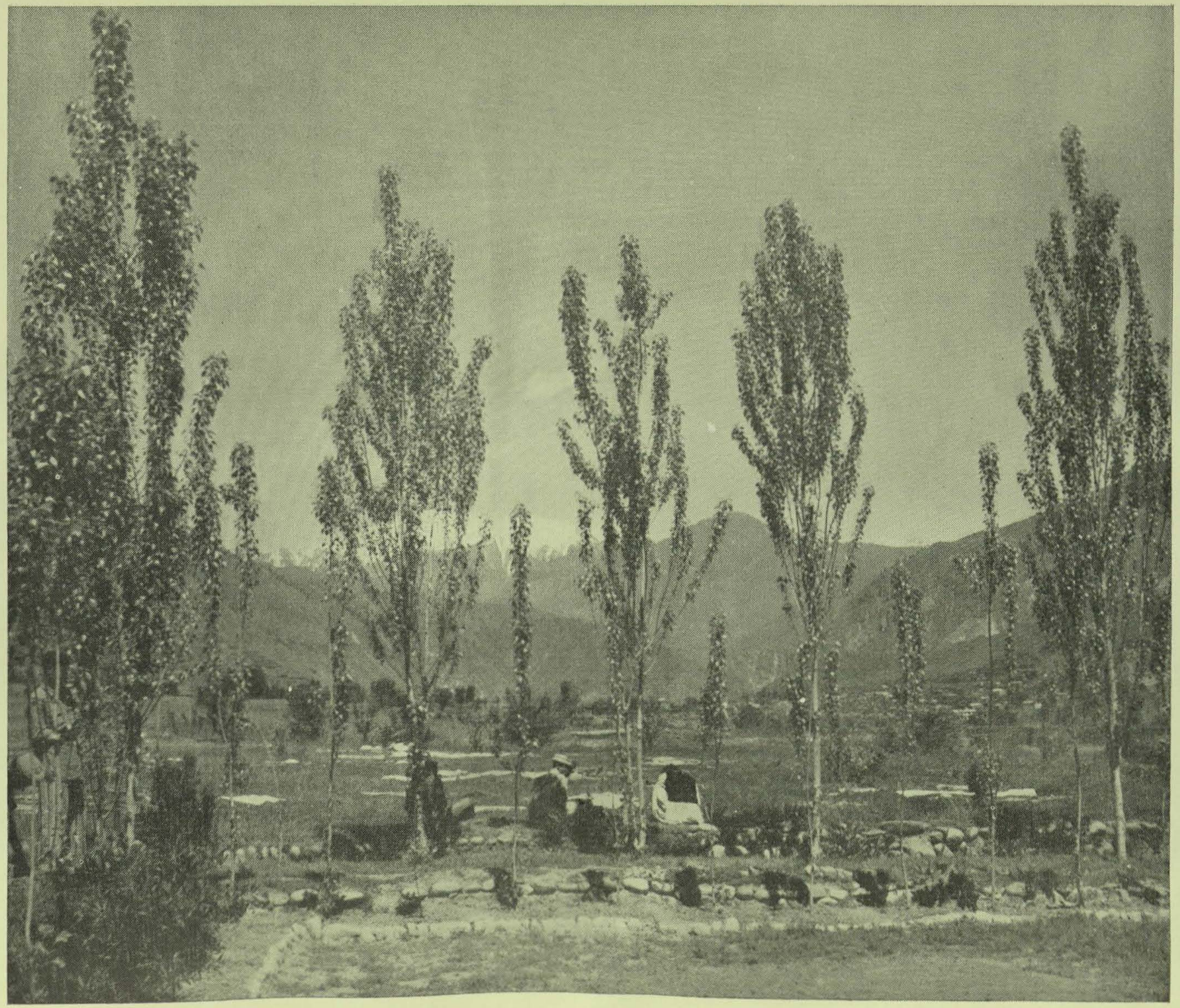


Muzaffarabad

## ANOTHER VIEW

The poplar trees seen in the picture are favourites of the hill people. Quick growing and stately, they can enhance the beauty of any landscape but more so of the hills and the vales.

Commonly known as "Safaida" it is also endearingly called "Dhup-Chaon" (Sun and shade) or "Din-Rat" (Night and Day) for the dark and light colour of the two sides of its leaves, which, when shimmering in the breeze, create an interesting optical illusion.



Another View

## DOMEL

Tourists who visited Kashmir valley before 1947, did not much care about Muzaffarabad. It was Domel that they were familiar with. "DO - MEL", of course means meeting of two rivers and is the confluence of rivers Jhelum and Neelam. In its hey-days it used to be a very prosperous and noisy little place. The Maharaja's custom barrier was established here and all visitors to the Valley had to stop for clearance. A tremendous traffic passed through and the place hummed with activity at all times of the day and night. The old timers are still overcome with nostalgia when they think of its luxurious rest-house by the river side and the wonderful food which they used to get there.

'Domel' is now a mere shadow of its old self. A couple of buses pass through without stopping. A few wood and tin contraptions have sprung up in place of the prosperous tea shops and eating houses. The once comfortable and spacious rest-house has been all but obliterated by the bombings during the War.

But what has vanished is only the human effort. Nature has not deserted Domel. It is still the confluence of Neelam and Jhelum. If you stand here in winters you see an interesting phenomenon. The water of Neelam, blue, clear, and sparkling, and that of Jhelum, muddy and yellow run separately, even after meeting, for many hundred yards before they finally merge into each other.

The view on the opposite page is from Jalalabad where I lived. In fact this is the view I lived with for more than three years and was most familiar. But it never ceased to interest me. Whenever I looked it was never the same. It changed from hour to hour, day to night, and season to season. The light, the shade, the tints, and the hues, constantly underwent subtle changes and sustained the onlookers' interest so that one could never pass that way without having an eyeful.

In the back-ground are the hills which bar the way of the mighty river and make it take a terrific turn to avoid them. Another river i.e. Kunhar, flows behind these hills and meets Jhelum a few miles down-stream.



Domel

## THE POLICE PIPERS

The sight of pipers of the Police band playing in the Muzaffarabad College ground seems as if the scene has been transplanted from Scotland. The surrounding hills which provide an ideal setting for pipe music, reverberate and resound with it on all important occasions in this capital city.

The people have so much taken to pipe music that small bands of two or three pipers have been organized in villages who pipe in all important events in the countryside.



The Police Pipers

## LOHAR GALI

If you approach Muzaffarabad from Abbotabad side, you descend upon the valley from Lohargali top (3000 ft.). There is a small rest-house at the Gali, and the view of Muzaffarabad valley from there is so arresting that visitors cannot help stopping there to have a look.

Down below, as can be seen in the picture, Jhelum takes a terrific U turn which is partially visible and could not entirely be caught by the Camera. Cutting across the centre of the picture is the road to Srinagar which is hardly 100 miles from this point.



Lohar Gali

## NEELAM VALLEY

Do you suspect a feminine touch about the name Neelam (Blue Saphire)? If you do, your hunch is correct. The name was given to the river by Nur-Jahan, the famous spouse of Emperor Jahangir. She camped near Muzaffarabad once on her way to the Valley and seeing the sparkling blue water of the river cried, "Behold the colour of these waters-just like Neelam". The name stuck. She did not, to be more accurate, give the river its name; she only changed it. Its legendary name, which had its origin in Hindu mythology, was Kishen Ganga.

It is strange that shifts in the history of Kashmir should have made themselves felt most in the ever-changing name of this river. When the area passed from the Moghals into the hands of the Sikhs, Neelam was renamed as Kishen Ganga and stayed as such till Azad Kashmir came into being in 1947. The 'Freedom Fighters' promptly changed the name to Neelam as soon as the fighting ceased.

The valley starting from Muzaffarabad is over 150 miles long and is one of the most picturesque areas of Azad Kashmir. Its elevation starts from a mere 2,000 feet and gradually rises till it stabilizes at 8,000 ft. in the upper reaches. On both sides are very high mountains, some reaching beyond 20,000 ft. The slopes are entirely covered with rich forests which are worked all the year round. The whole length reverberates with the din of axe blows, crashes of the falling trees, and splashes of logs slipping into current. Ninety per cent of the Azad Kashmir's forest wealth is concentrated here.

Though endowed with so much of natural wealth, its people are the poorest in Azad Kashmir. The area is so inaccessible and the rigours of the journey so great, that civilization, or prosperity, or administration just do not travel that far. Most of the valley remains snow-bound for half of the year. In winter the route is so treacherous that no communication with Muzaffarabad is possible. Cultivable land is limited and the valley does not grow enough food. Large quantities have to be transported and stocked in summer months. Any freak of weather like an untimely rain or an early or late snow-fall dislocates the food arrangements and people have then to face great deprivation. Once in 1958 when a minor famine threatened the valley, I saw people coming down on a food lifting trip to Nauseri (25 miles from Muzaffarabad) lasting 8 days both ways to take back 40 pounds of food grain as held load.

Even if the food is available, where is the money to buy it? Normally a family eats what it grows which is not much. The cultivators till their land at the advent of summer and shift to high pasture lands with their families and cattle and whatever meagre provisions are left over from the earlier season. In the lean years when it is not enough and does not last till it is time to return, the human beings share the grass and the weeds and the leaves of the trees with their cattle till it is time to come down and reap the new harvest. But the people suffer all this with rare stoicism.

A trip through the valley is by no means easy. The pony track which is cut out of the steep slopes does not follow any rational alignment. It goes up and down like a see-saw and tires you out completely at the end of the day. The travel on horse back is not made easier by the ponies who, through a mysterious urge, walk on the very outer edge of the track. And when they get tired, they turn their backs towards the slope and hang out into the open to inhale deeply. Looking down thousands of feet into the rushing stream from that precarious perch sends creeps down your back for the first two or three days, but you get used to these hazards. The wonderful scenery through which you pass makes you forget these little annoyances.

Log huts built by the Forest Department are available at easy distances upto Sharda village. After that a visitor is on his own and will have to depend upon the hospitality of the local inhabitants which is always available. At Kel the valley splits into two, one joins with Gilgit and the other, over very high plateaus, with Skardu. It is ironic that deeper you go into the valley, prettier it turns out; as the discomforts and the hazards increase, so does the lure of the valley and the urge to go on.

One often hears of a double in the field of sports, like in cricket or tennis. Such a double is also possible in the field of tourism *i.e.* doing Neelam and Kaghan Valleys in the same trip.

Before commencing our tour of Neelam Valley, we had decided to have a try at it through one of the many Galis (passes) used by the nomads and seasonal forest labour for their comings and goings between the two valleys. Two of the more known such Galis are the Nuri Gali and the Ratti Gali. The former branches off from Sharda and the latter from Dawarian. At Sharda the accounts of Nuri Gali were horrifying and uncertain. Nobody could tell us the actual distance. The guess ranged from 25 miles to 50 miles. It was a matter of pure conjecture whether the way, which involved going over a height of 16,000 ft., would be free of ice, or bound by it, and whether it would be a thick hard crust or a thin hollow over the deep nullahs which flowed underneath waiting to suck anyone who dared. So we discarded the idea and hoped for better luck with Ratti Gali.

At Dawarian the information was no more certain and the prospects no better, but the idea was too tempting to be dropped altogether. We could know only this much that it involved two days' journey and a night-fall at Dharian at 12,000 ft. Already there had been a snowfall at the pass. If we got entrapped in another, that would be the end of our tour and of us as well. The nomads and the locals who spend their summers there had long since come down. Everyone tried to dissuade us from this trip.

Luckily we were in wireless communication with Rawalpindi. We asked for information about the weather prospects for the next day. Back came the answer: Minimum temperature at 12,000 ft. 32°. Wind: 30 Knots. Weather: clear. That decided it.

The journey did not start happily for us. Our Communication Officer's horse was led on to the steep foot-track rather than the pony-track by the guide. The horse slipped and fell down. The rider and the mount would have both fallen into the chasm and killed, had their progress downhill been not arrested by an intervening pine tree. The man was so shaken that he refused to mount again, and preferred to walk the rest of the day. When just a mile short of the camp he fainted and was carried into the camp. His condition caused us some worry but some rest and food revived him completely.

The whole day it was going up and up. All the familiar objects deserted us one by one. The hamlets, the human beings, the animals, the vegetation, and the birds, all were left behind. We finally entered the 'Silence Zone'. It was a strange feeling. We were completely overwhelmed by the stark grandeur of nature and our own insignificance before it. Finally at the camp, we still had time to go and see the main attraction enroute; the Dharian Lake. Tucked like a huge blue-saphire in the side of the mountain, its beauty is beyond words. The impact it has on you when you suddenly come upon it is really indescribable.

We returned to our camp at dusk to spend a very uncomfortable night under the 'Canvas' in temperatures which felt far less than promised to us. Some of the members of our camp had even a rougher deal. As shelter for the night, they had selected the small hovels built by local inhabitants as summer houses. Starving armies of loathsome bugs, the "Khatmals" and the "Pissus" and "Utrus", invaded them. They spent the whole night scratching.

Next morning we broke camp early as we had a long way to go. The progress upto the Gali (14, 500) wasslow and exhausting for us but more so for our horses. After every four or five steps they would stop and inhale deeply in the rarefied atmosphere.

At this stage we had the feeling of being in a completely different world. The only creature to remind us of our still being on mother earth was the "Mountain Rat", a yellow oversized ratlike vermin which abound in the area. Hearing of our approach they would come out of their burrows, sit on their hinds and emit a very shrill whistle either of alarm, or surprise or welcome, we were not sure. They would audaciously sit there and watch us pass by. This happened at burrow after burrow and the snow covered mountains were soon resounding with a succession of shrill noises thus marking our progress. The poor creatures appeared such good targets that we felt highly tempted to try our aims at them. Many of us, some reported crack shots, fired our rifles, but we did not bag any. At every shot the fellow would jump up and drop backwards into its burrow and disappear—alive or dead it was difficult to decide.

The going was hard and long. The route seemed never ending, but as the sun was going down, the signs of life and civilization returned in the order in which they had disappeared, *i.e.*, the birds, the trees, the animals, the human beings, the barking of the dogs, the hamlets, and the villages. Ultimately, with a sigh of relief, we sighted "Bura Wai" Rest House on the Gilgit Road and our land-rovers, which had been brought all the way from Muzaffarabad to fetch us, waiting. Soon we were on our way to Naran, where awaited comforts of civilization again.

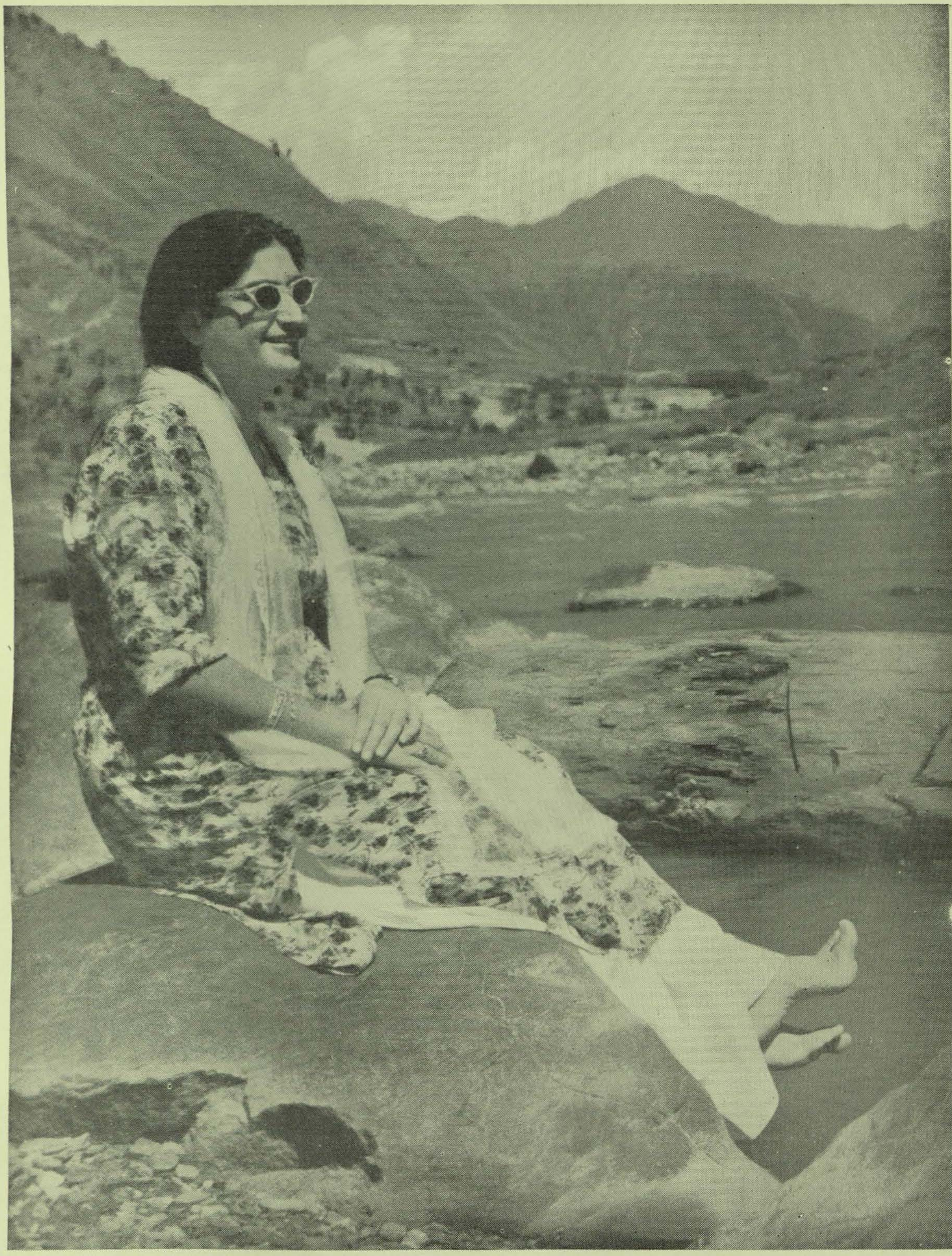
When you commence your journey through Neelam Valley, the barren and rugged slopes, and the rushing stream passing through fearsome gorges do not hold much promise. It is only gradually that the outlook improves. After some days' journey the valley expands and the current slows down, sometime even forming placid lakes.

The picture on the opposite page shows the mouth of the valley, barren, cheerless, and uninviting. The only break is provided by the cool, blue, rushing waters of Neelam. In fact its water, fresh from the snows, is so cold that you can't keep your fingers dipped for long in it even in summers.

The place shown in the picture is the favourite haunt of Muzaffarabadis. On summer evenings they come here in droves to seek relief from the heat of the town. The breeze, in passing over Neelam, brings down the temperature by 10-15 degrees in the immediate vicinity of the current converting the area into a cool and comfortable retreat.

Please take off your eyes from the lady in the foreground for a moment. Her presence in the picture is only accidental. You should concentrate on the huge log of wood which is only partially visible. This is a symbol as well as an index to the economy of Neelam Valley—nay of Azad Kashmir itself. Most of the forest reserves of Azad Kashmir lie in Neelam Valley and Neelam is the cheapest and most natural mode of its transport. The log traffic is so thick that the entire length of the River chokes with it. It is only in summer floods that the strong current is able to clear all the load. An interesting sight is to see swimmers on inflated goat skins floating about the river to nudge the strayed logs into the current at flood times. The timber is finally retrieved at Jhelum city which is a big timber market.

Incidentally the forest trade of the other "Kashmir" has been badly hit as there is no way to transport the timber from the valley to the plains. Previously all the timber floated through rivers Jhelum and Neelam which now ultimately flow through Azad Kashmir.



Neelam Valley

## THE HORROR BRIDGE

The variety of the bridges in Azad Kashmir is fabulous. Some of them are horrors of the worst kind that human ingenuity could contrive. This bridge at Salkhala in its hey days probably claimed more lives than any other. With one of its base firmly fixed in the side of the rock and the other lightly placed on the bed of the river, it was supported by iron ropes which, because of a huge span, arched awkwardly making it swing crazily in the slightest of breezes. Many travellers lost their lives when a sudden and strong gust of wind swung the bridge fiercely and threw the unwary travellers in the fast moving stream down below. It claimed so many lives that a police guard had to be posted to close it in the afternoon when the breeze was usually strong.

Just before we reached there, a person was allowed on the bridge at about sun-set when the breeze had subsided. He had hardly gone some feet when a sudden gust completely over-turned the bridge. The unfortunate fellow clutched the planks in his arms and hung there for dear life for a brief moment till the gust passed and the bridge returned to its normal position. He was so overcome with fright that he lay on the bridge not moving, with planks held firmly in his cramped grasp. He was hastily brought back to safety, and was indeed lucky to escape.

However, the unprecedented floods of 1959 carried the bridge and all in its wake. Instead of recreating this horror, the Government built a new track on the right side of the stream making it unnecessary for people to cross the river at this point, much to the relief of the local populace.

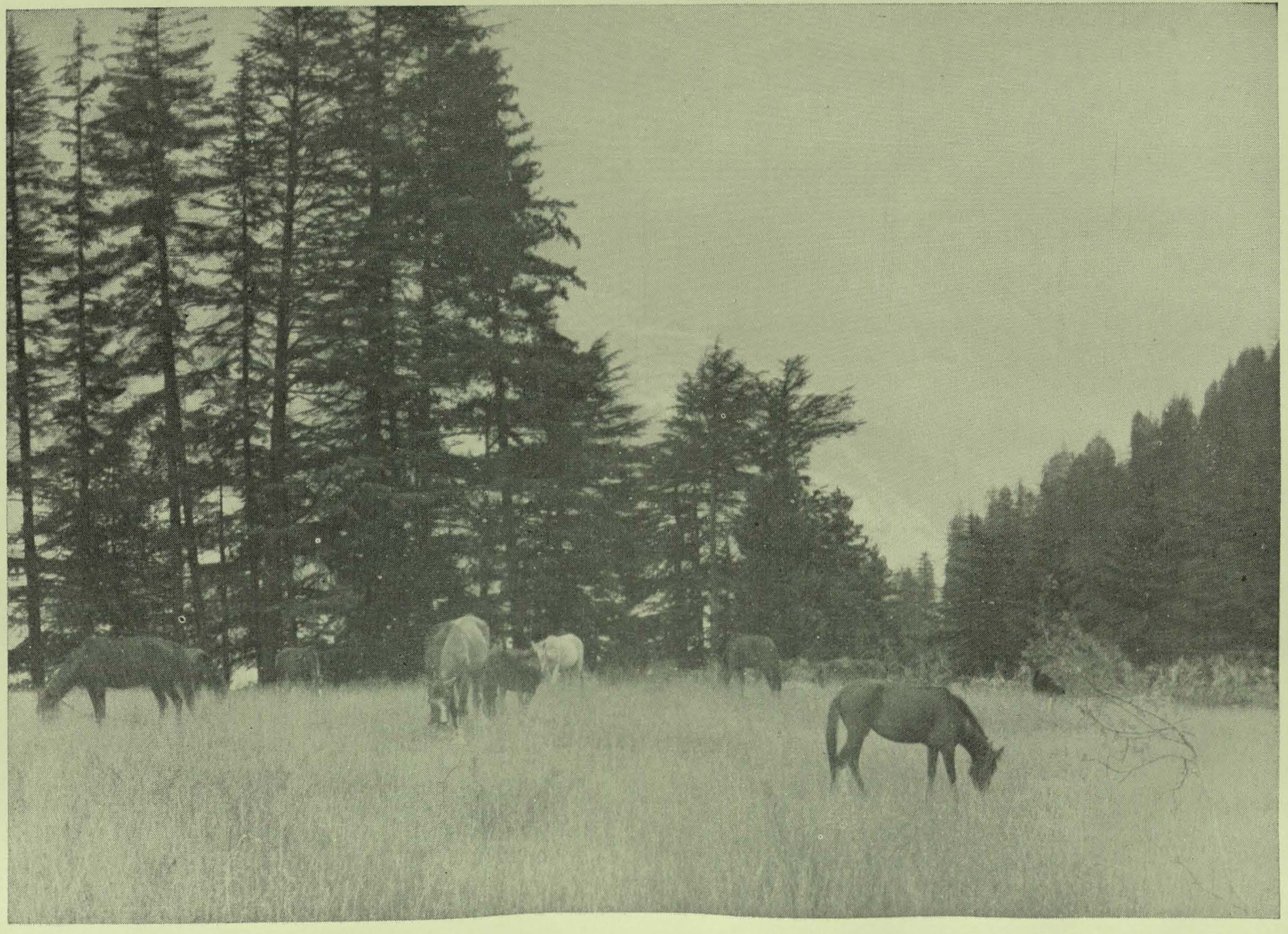


The Horror Bridge

## DAWARIAN

It is not a horse breeding farm, but the compound of the forest rest-house at Dawarian. The horses belong to our camp and had been feeding all through the night while we slept.

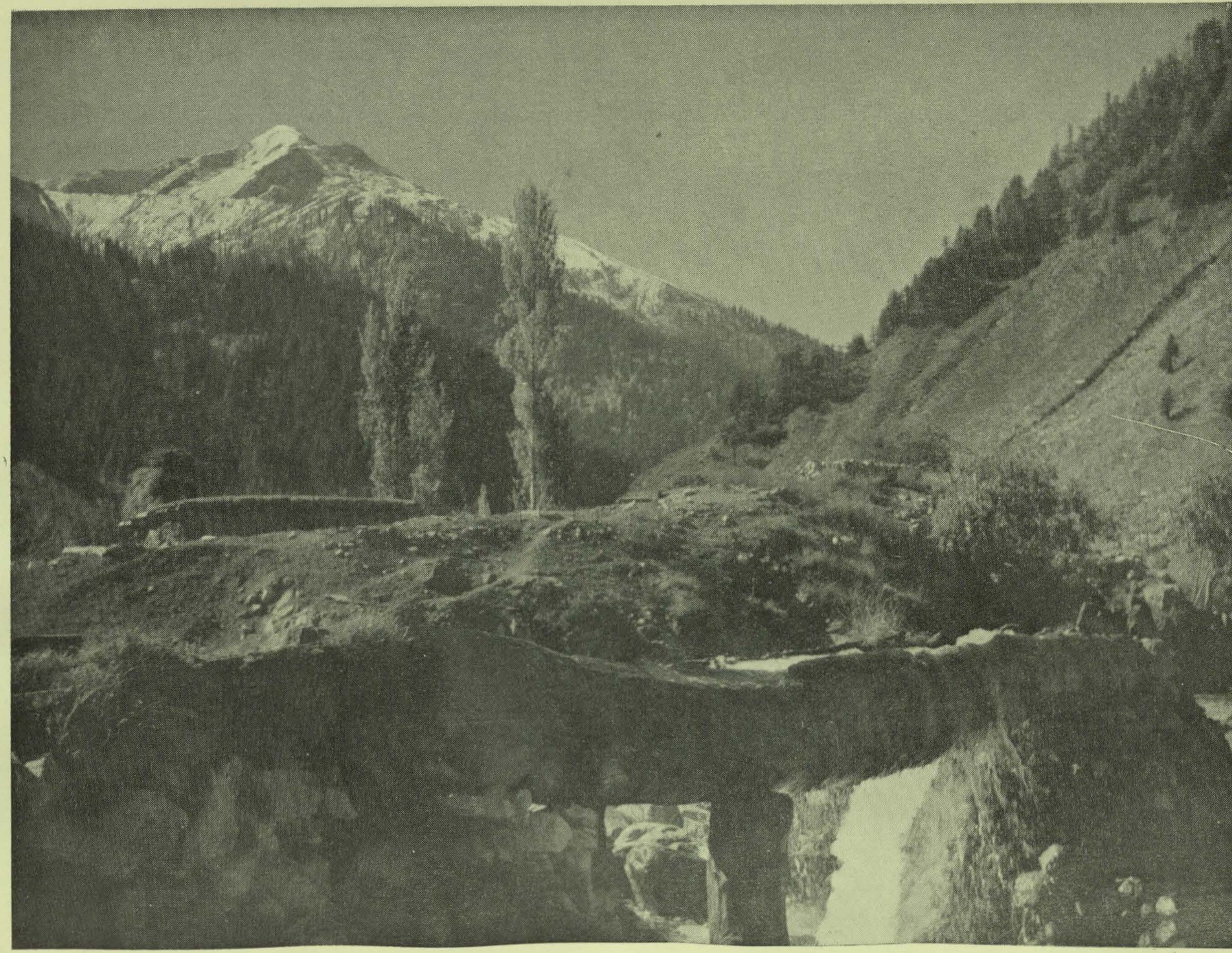
Dawarian which is situated at a height of 5,000 ft. is about three days march from Muzaffarabad. The rest-house located on top of a hill is surrounded by stately pine trees on all sides and provides a very fine view of the forested hills all around. The picture was taken just after sun-rise, when the distant hills were still shrouded in a thick mist.



Dawarian

## AQUE-DUCT

Carrying of irrigation water over broken terrain imposes quite a strain on the meagre intellectual and physical resources of the people in the interior. Here a hollowed tree trunk serves as a very inefficient medium; nearly half of the water spills out and goes down the drain.



Aque-Duct

## TWO SISTERS

The girls in Azad Kashmir, specially the little ones, are all pretty, uninhibited, and, like all little girls—frankly curious. Strangers, particularly the "tourist types" with their various gadgets like cameras and transistors never fail to arouse their interest. Whenever you stop on the way, they come in droves and stall the camp for hours to look you over properly and to know what you are really upto. Here two sisters who were similarly drawn to our camp pose for me, the younger smiling frankly, the elder trying to look like a lady, against the imposing background of their surroundings.



Two Sisters

## WALKWAY

For the first two or three days of journey through the valley you mostly get distant glimpses of the current. It runs through a succession of gorges with the track keeping up as best as it can. When you finally come out of the gorges and level up with Neelam, this is how it looks. You never want to leave it again.



Walkway

## THE TWIST

Neelam twists and turns all the way long till it merges into Jhelum at Domel. Here is a typical bend near Dudnial village.



The Twist

## A VISITOR

The forest contractors bring "Kohistani" labour from adjacent Kaghan to work the forests as they are cheaper and are considered hardier than what is locally available. A "Kohistani" can stand great rigours and exist on almost nothing on the long and hazardous journey to and from the work. On these journeys, which extend over many days through one of the bleakest terrain, a "Kohistani" travels as a self-contained unit.

Here with one week's provision, a kettle, and a rug, on his back, a small axe for self-defence as well as for cutting firewood in his hand, he looks the very picture of fortitude and is ready to brave anything.



A Visitor

## PLAY GROUND OF A TRAGEDY

"What a heavenly life" was our spontaneous reaction when we first spotted the tent of the forest contractor in this pine covered piece of land by the rushing Neelam. You can judge the height of the trees by the dwarfed members of our party who look like little children playing by the river side against the tall pines.

This camping ground was only a few months later to prove the grave of the poor man and his brother. An unprecedented heavy and early rain fell in the month of May in the year 1959. The snow on the mountain tops had not melted by then, and the whole walls of ice slided into the river uprooting pine trees in hundreds and thousands which floated down the river in a thick mass. The rains continued for three days and three nights and caused the heaviest ever known floods in Neelam.

The forest contractor and his family who were still living in the tents shown in the picture, sensed the danger when water rose rapidly and spread over the camping ground. But unfortunately their retreat was cut by the water which started flowing over a long abandoned bed at the back. They selected two of the strongest trees and, tying the chorpoys with the ropes, hoisted themselves up, women and children on one, two brothers on the other. Sometimes during the night when the water poured in sheets from above and rushed in torrents down below, a cluster of trees floating on the mad current struck against the tree which supported the two brothers. It was lifted clean and carried away along with the two unlucky ones. Nothing was heard or seen in the terrific din and the pitch dark night by the survivors who came to know of their loss next morning when they could not find any trace of the tree or its occupants. They cried and shouted for help but the people of the village across the river who had been watching the distress of the family anxiously could not render any help till next day when the rain stopped and the water subsided to permit crossing. The distressed women and children were then brought down and escorted to Muzaffarabad.



Play Ground of a Tragedy

## THE LAKE

Our eyes which were used to only the fury and the anger of Neelam's current would not believe that it could convert itself into a lake as placid as you see on the opposite page. The madly rushing river suddenly becomes the very picture of tranquillity.

This lake did not, however, seem to be permanent as the dried pine tree in the foreground would show. There were a number of such trees standing in water and had obviously dried up recently. Probably the river, due to some unknown reason, got dammed up and formed this lake which in its turn partially submerged the nearby trees and killed them. It appeared only a temporary phenomenon and will continue as long as the impediment which caused the damming up of the river stays.



The Lake

## THE LAKE (Another View)

Seeing the clear water and the sandy "beach" I wished I had my swimming trunks with me. But I was disillusioned as soon as I dipped my fingers in the water. It was so cold that I could not have stayed in there for over a minute without risking pneumonia.



The Lake (Another View)

## A FERRY

In a land excessively intersected by gorges and rushing streams, the need to overcome these obstacles is as great as it is difficult. The people have solved this problem of ages in a variety of ways. Here, where the rare placidity of the river permits it, the villagers have marshalled a crudely built ferry. The oars have been shaped to match.



A Ferry

## HOMEWARDS

It is the month of September and time to come back home from the high pasture lands which have become too cold. The well-fed animals are on their way down where they will spend the winters.

Almost all land owners in Muzaffarabad and some areas of Poonch District own two sets of lands, down below in the villages for cultivation and up on top to serve as pastures in the summers. The entire population shuttles back and forth over the year to get the best out of nature.



Homewards

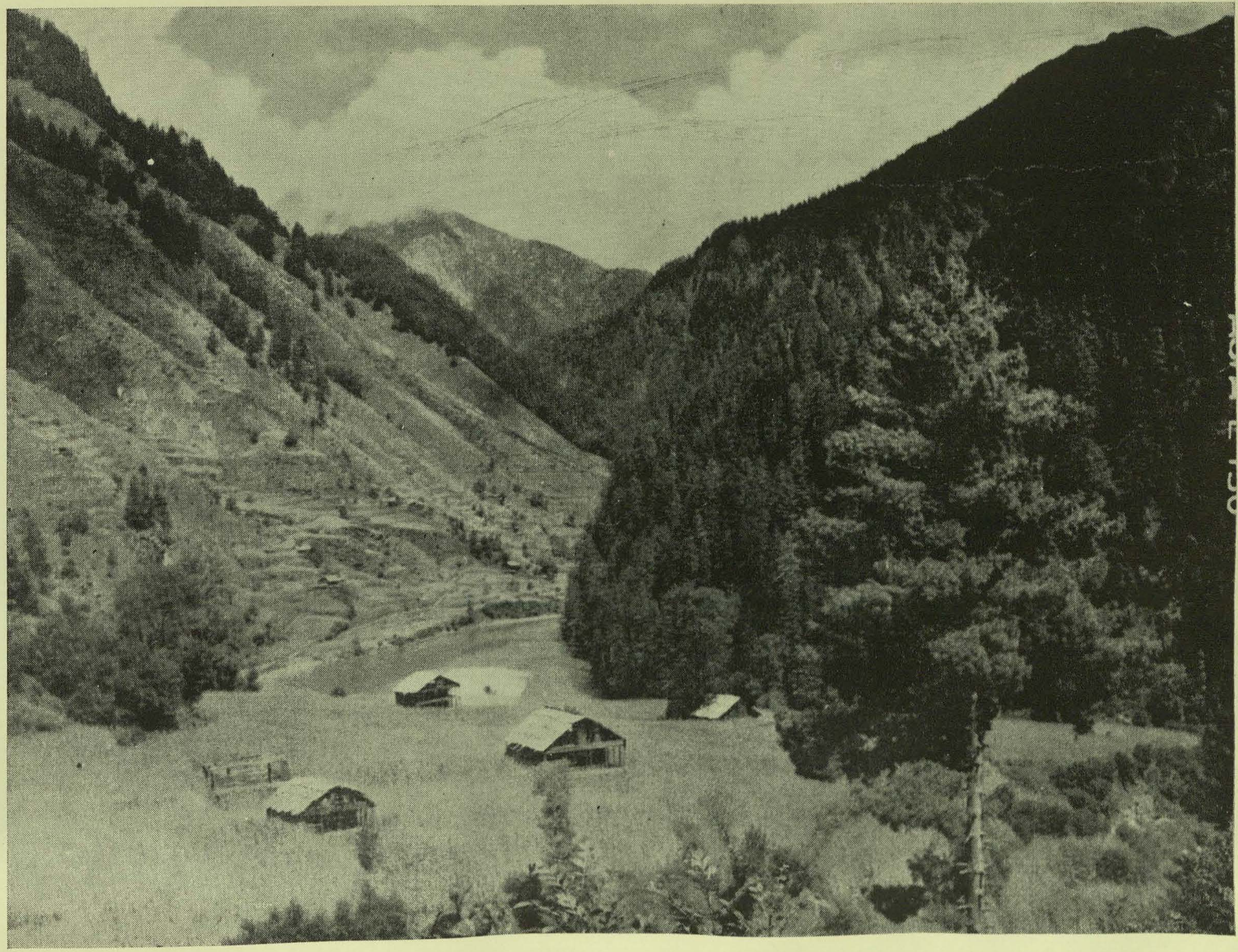
## SHARDA

The Village Headman of Sharda pointed to the two distant peaks which looked like two fat ladies busy in some earnest conversation, and informed us that those were the legendary abodes of the two Hindu Deities—Sharda and Narda. Sharda village is named after the former.

The history of the village thus goes back to the mythological time. In ancient times when the sacredness of a place of Hindu pilgrimage was measured in direct proportion to the hazards involved in the journey, Sharda occupied a place of honour. If the same yard-stick is applied even now Sharda stands behind none. However, the place's real fame relates to the Buddhist era. When this area came under the Buddhist influence, Sharda quickly became the seat of an important monastery, and its name as a great place of learning spread far and wide. Scholars from distant lands, from India and China and other Central Asian countries, came in search of education to what was probably one of the first residential universities in this sub-continent. Its ruins can still be seen although these are in great state of neglect and are disintegrating fast.

Sharda's present day importance is only administrative; the last Police Station of Azad Kashmir is located here. Between here and the country's border with Gilgit there are another hundred or so miles, but a mere handful of policemen find no difficulty at all in keeping peace in the area; the inhabitants are so law-abiding.

The scenery around the village is exquisite. The valley opens out permitting large scale cultivation. Hill tops are covered with rich green forest and Neelam River flows majestically through the broadened valley. The Monsoons seldom penetrate upto here and the clear and cool summer days at this height (6,000) are simply glorious.



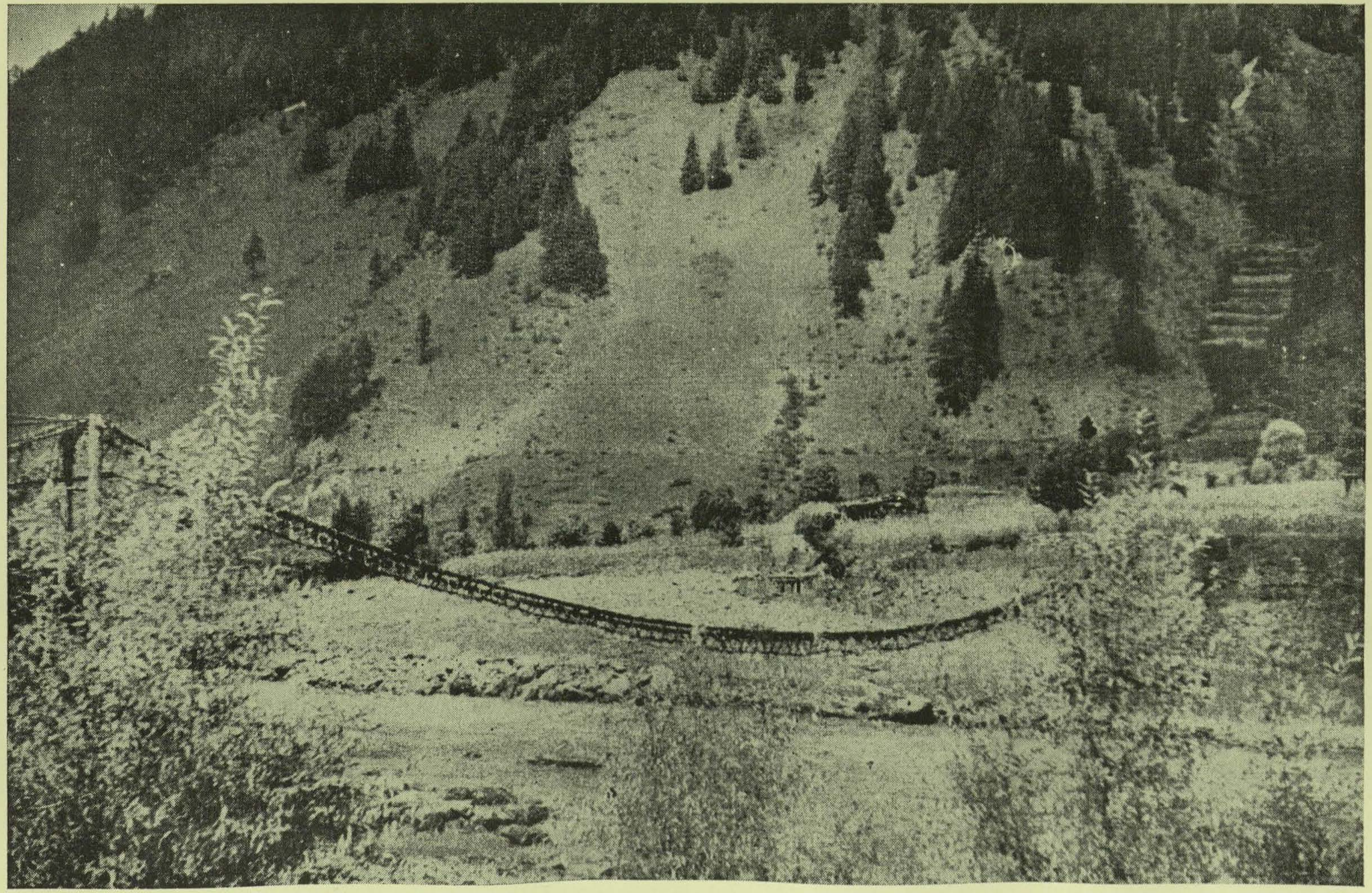
Sharda

## JHOOLA
## or
## THE SWING BRIDGE

To know what a swing bridge is you have to know how it is contrived. The use of such sophisticated items as nuts, bolts, and iron ropes in the interior is out of question. The people have to depend upon local products like wooden beams and twig ropes. The thick beams are fixed on both sides of the span. Twig ropes of sufficient strength are then tied across, two over and one below. The lower rope is then linked with upper ropes with thinner twig ropes in a criss-cross fashion forming countless "Vs". The bridge is now ready for crossing. Because of the unmanageable span, the ropes make a terrific inverted arch and when you walk over it, the whole thing moves to and fro like a swing, hence the name 'Jhoola' (swing).

A novice has to be thoroughly briefed before he ventures on his hazardous trip of crossing the river on a swing. You have to hold the upper ropes in your two hands and with that support you heave yourself forward and proceed by placing your feet one after the other, very much like a rope-walker, on the lower rope. You never know whether to mind your hands or feet and you are instinctively looking down. When you reach the centre of the rushing stream you suddenly loose all sense of direction and purpose and feel as if you are floating up-stream at a terrific speed. You look up in terror and never know whether your next foot will take you ahead or down. When you are finally on the other side you have earned a new life and never want to take the return trip. But it is impossible to avoid unless, of course, you decide to become a hermit and spend the rest of your life there and wait for civilization to come and rescue you.

The local inhabitants, however, seem never to mind it. They cross it every day burdened with sheep, and goat, and provisions, and children and sick relatives. The ropes wear down by constant use but there is no way to know it beforehand. When they snap and go down alongwith the unlucky ones who happen to be crossing at that moment, the villagers know that it is time to replace the ropes. It may not be so economical a method in human lives but it is fool-proof.

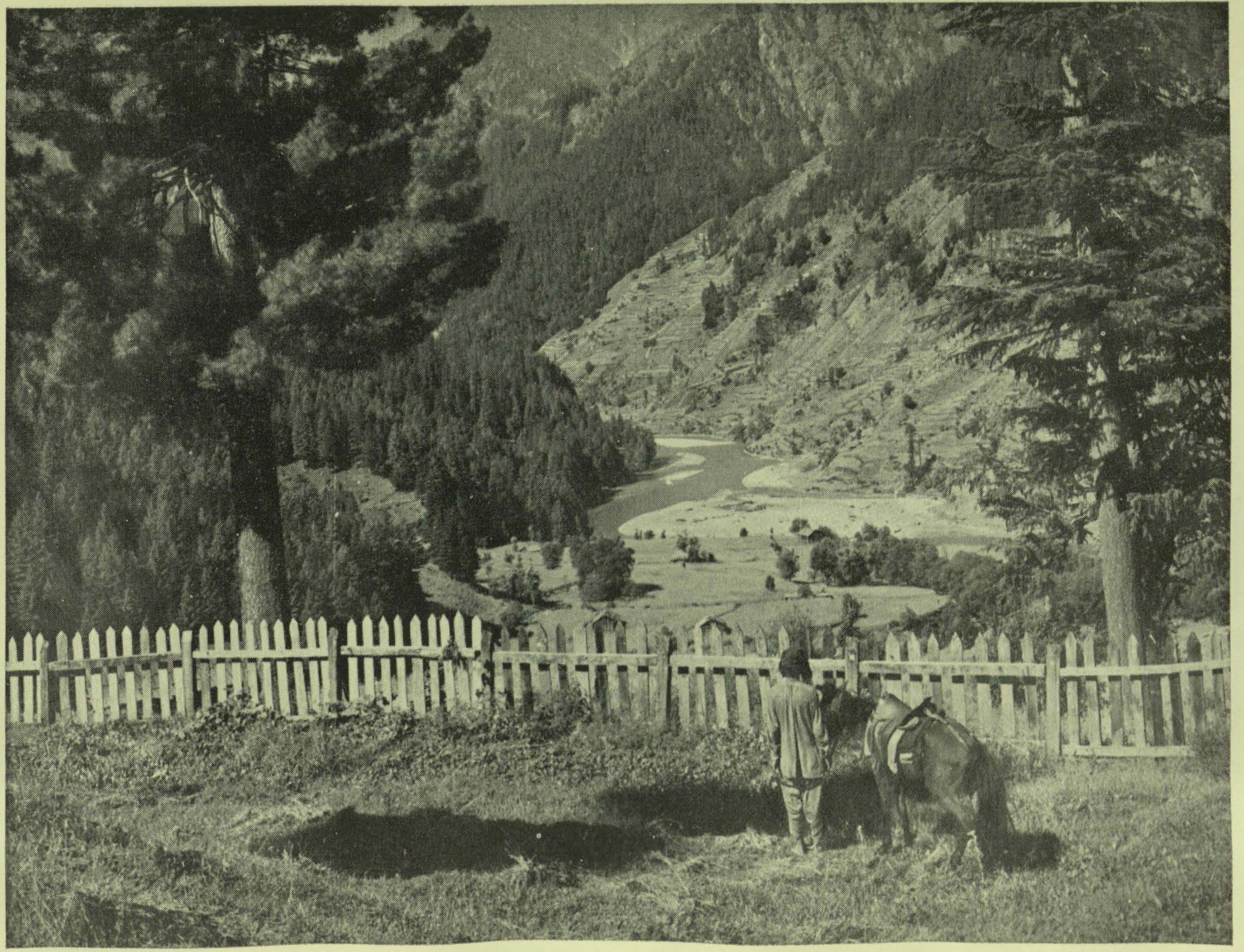


Jhoola

## PYTHON

Neelam meanders all the way through high mountains like a python. The view on the opposite page is from Forest Rest-House at Sharda village. Now something about these forest rest-houses.

As you proceed on the journey, a queer resentment mounts within you against Forest authorities, and this is for their blind choice of location for the rest-houses. You reach your destination, a village naturally, having walked the whole day completely exhausted and hungry like a wolf. There are generally some people gathered to welcome you. Formalities over, you look around for a place to spend the night. But no, sir, so the welcoming throng gleefully informs you, you have to go to the forest rest-house. "Where about is that now?" "Oh! About two or three miles, sir". "Which way?" "Just on top of that hill behind those trees!" And you only wish you had laid your hands on the throat of the man responsible before he selected the site.



Python

## POLO AT KEL

Kel (8,000 ft.) is the place where two races and cultures *i.e.* Aryan and Mongolide, meet. It is also the place where human beings seem to loose their hold on nature and are dwarfed to tiny, helpless, living organism against the terrific scale on which nature manifests itself. Even Neelam loses its significance before the tremendous mountains.

Kel is inhabited by a mixed stock. Balti dialect is spoken and understood here. The fine features and pink Kashmiri complexion gives place to flat noses, almond eyes, and yellow skin. Like all Central Asian people, they are fond of playing polo which is the only recreation available to them. The local 'Headman' rigged up a match in our honour which you see in progress on the opposite page. The local team consisting of the "Headman" a man over 55 years of age, and his three sons was pitted against the Gilgit scouts. The latter form part of the famed "Frontier Corps" raised by the British to look after the North-Western border of their Indian Empire. At the time of "Partition" the Scouts who were all Muslims rebelled against the local Hindu Governor, captured the Provincial administration and declared independence.

Although Kel is administratively a part of Azad Kashmir, but the Scouts supervise the Cease-Fire-Line in the area on grounds of administrative convenience. Reverting to the Polo match, the local team lost it by a very narrow margin.



Polo at Kel

## THE REAPERS

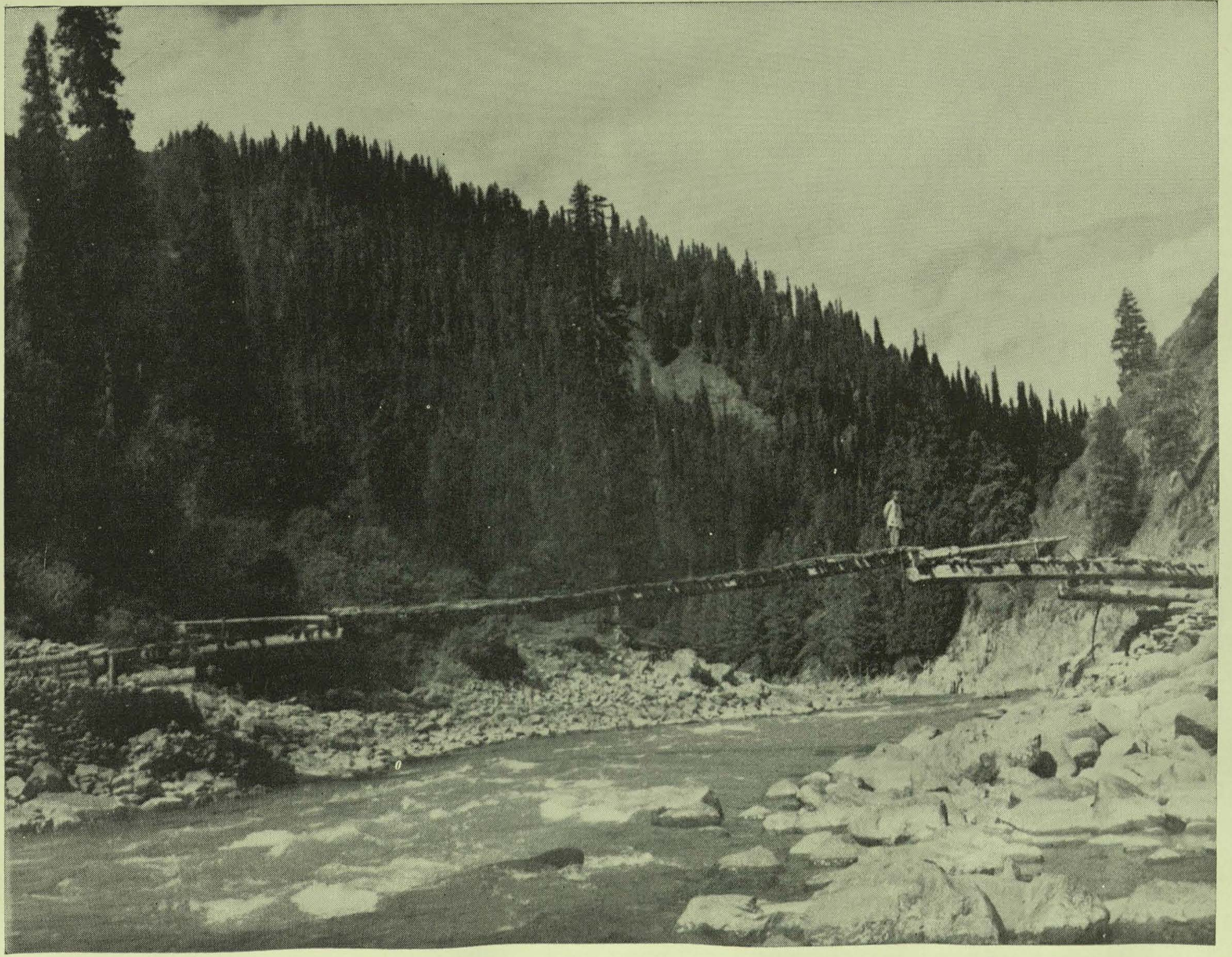
The reapers here collect something with which we were not at all familiar. It is a cereal they call "Ratumba". It is of the same family as wheat and barley and suits the climate of the higher reaches of the valley.



The Reapers

## ANOTHER HORROR

This bridge is another horror, but a milder one. This contraption is possible only in the upper reaches of Neelam where the span is not so big. The beams from both ends are projected to reduce the gap in the middle—which is then bridged with the longest available logs and covered with loose boards. When you walk over it, the whole structure shakes and shouts and groans in protest. Sometimes the loose boards fall off leaving frightening gaps which necessitate highly intricate leap frogging at which you just cannot afford to fail or miss a step.



Another Horror

## "NEELAM — ANOTHER VIEW"

The one peculiarity of Neelam Valley is that farther north you go, broader and prettier it turns out to be. The extreme northern portion is really the most beautiful. It was while speaking of this place that a member of a Swiss Expedition which passed through here some years ago had exclaimed: "The fir trees, the log-houses, the snow and the ice—just like home".



Neelam (Another View)

## RATTI GALI

The picture on the opposite page depicts a rare moment. It shows the greatest height (14,500) that I ever attained on my journeys in Azad Kashmir. It was taken at Ratti Gali, the pass which joins Neelam with Kaghan valley. It is also here that Pakistan and Azad Kashmir territories meet. The pass is never free from snow and journey through it is safe only in late summers when most of the ice has melted away and what remains turns into a hard crust.

'DHARIAN' Lake is in the cup in the far centre.

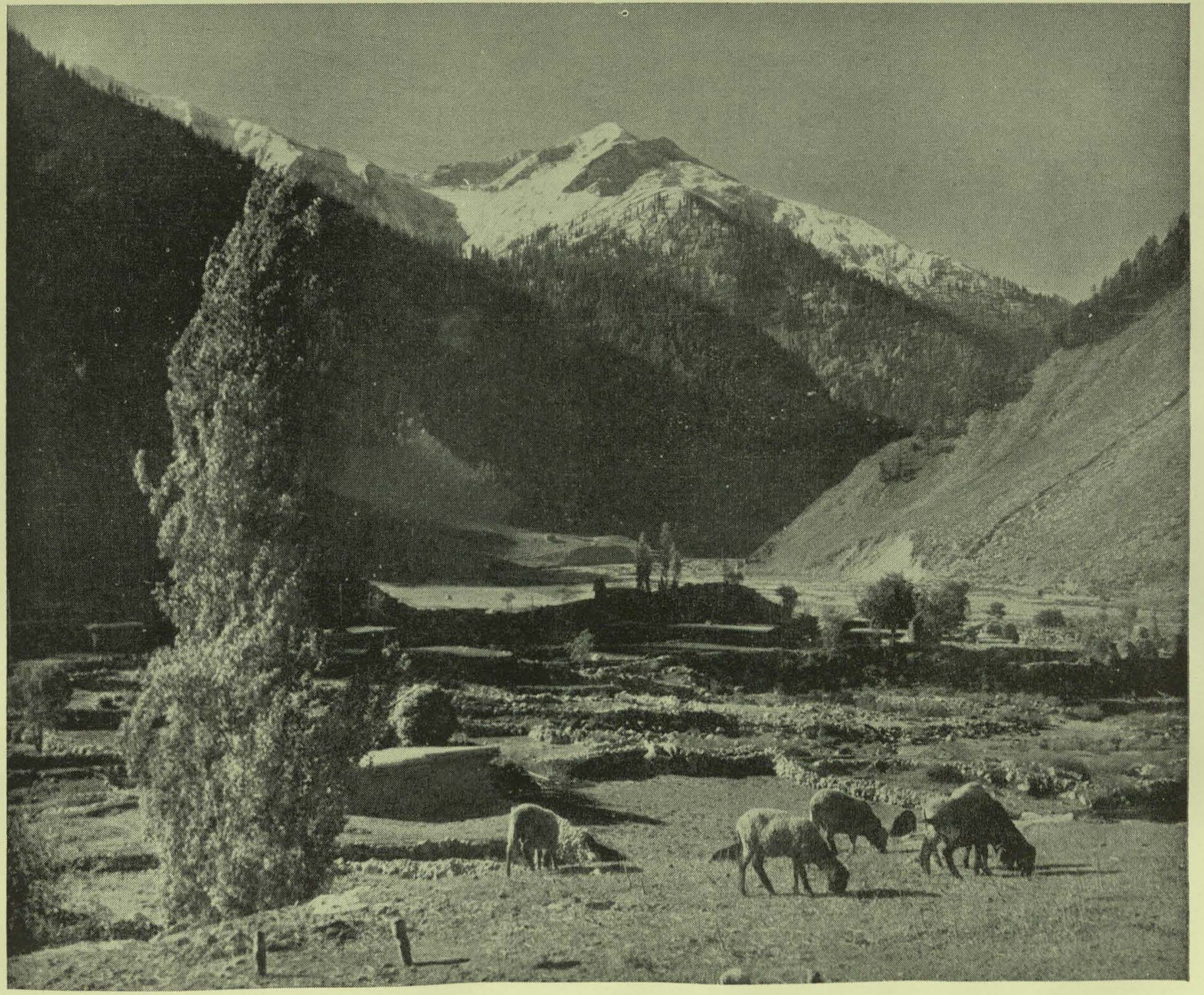


Ratti Gali

## NARAN

This picture does not belong here. It was taken at Naran, in Kaghan valley, where we spent the night after we concluded our trip through the Neelam valley. This is shown here for the purpose of comparison alone.

Kaghan and Neelam valleys run parallel to each other through their entire lengths. But this is the nearest that they come. So far as scenic beauty is concerned, Kaghan, in my opinion, is not even a patch on Neelam. I had first visited Kaghan in 1950 when the newly built road had just been opened to public. Except for very small stretches I was not very much impressed then either. But after a visit to Neelam, Kaghan provided a definite anti-climax. Its gorges looked narrower, its slopes more barren, and its tops more rugged. Kunhar river did not look more than a trickle. Naran is the only place which had some —but only some—features to remind us of the Neelam valley.



Naran

## POONCH DISTRICT

A limited representation of Poonch District does not mean that it lacks natural beauty. It is full of pretty spots; only its beauty is not dramatic enough to be adequately presented in a black and white picture.

The whole district is a high land deeply cut by rushing hill torrents which have carved it into three islands of beauty i.e. plateaus of Dhirkot (7,000), Rawalkot (5,000) and Aliabad (8,000). Of the three, Rawalkot area holds the biggest promise. The area consists of a chain of expansive valleys which are as flat as the palm of your hand. It is here only that availability of flat land for development ceases to be a problem. It also possesses a variety of beautiful spots like Banjosa, Toli-Pir, Trarkhel and Pollandri, within easy distance of each other. The area has, therefore, rightly been selected for developing it as a hill station. Plans are already on the drawing board for an ambitious programme of a township which might ultimately be made the Summer Headquarters of the Azad Kashmir Government.

The district is the home of the proud "Suddhan", the tribe which was the first to take up arms against the Dogra tyranny, and does rightfully claim the greatest share in the subsequent fighting and sacrifices. They claim to be Saddozai Pathans, much to the amusement of the other tribes. Their slender claim, however, seems to be based more on their fair complexion, blue eyes, and brown hair, and, of course, the high fighting qualities, which they share with the Pathans, rather than on any historical basis.

A fair weather road traverses the entire length of the district with a chain of modern rest-houses built at all important places. A tourist can, therefore, have a good and comfortable look at most of the district. Only Aliabad, which wedges into the Indian held part, is not connected by road. And it is a serious handicap, as, in my opinion, Aliabad is by far the most beautiful place in the whole of the district.

## PLANTING THE PADDY

Wherever sufficient spring water is available for perennial irrigation, the slopes have been levelled up in terraces of all shapes and sizes for paddy cultivation. At plantation time the fields are filled with clean blue waters of the springs. The whole slopes thus filled with water dazzle in the strong sun and weave fantastic geometrical patterns all around.



Planting the Paddy

## HIGH EDUCATION

"Suddhan Gali" (9,000 ft.) is the pass which connects Muzaffarabad District with Poonch by a more direct route. On both sides are found some of the finest pine forests of Azad Kashmir.

When we reached the top after a very bumpy, dusty, and dangerous journey, this was what we saw. A bunch of happy, apple-cheeked boys pursuing their studies in the open air. High education indeed!

On seeing us coming the boys broke up the class in excitement and clustered around us — the teacher no less excited and solicitous. But they readily rearranged themselves in neat rows for the picture.

We stayed with them for some time for a cup of tea and an amiable chatter. The boys obviously welcomed the break in routine and availed of the opportunity in going over the jeeps and its occupants rather thoroughly.



High Education

## MIRPUR

For a country of the size of Azad Kashmir, the variety of climate, terrain and human material is fantastic. Mirpur District which adjoins Jhelum and Gujrat Districts of West Pakistan, with its flat plains and barren and rocky hills seems hardly a part of Kashmir. In fact it is not. It was one of the districts of Jammu Province of the State and, therefore, distinctly different from "Kashmir".

True that Mirpur is devoid of natural beauty, yet it is rich in one material which probably matters most *i.e.* the human material. They are tough and hardy and highly adventurous. They are in fact the people who in a sense have reversed the course of history and have put the West on the defensive in their own humble way. There is not a family in Mirpur whose two or three able-bodied men are not earning their livelihood in U.K. Since the turn of the present century a slow and steady migration from Mirpur to U.K. started till it assumed a proportion which the Azad Kashmir Government had to take notice of and adopted various measures to facilitate and regulate it. It is from Mirpur that this obsession spread to the adjoining parts of West Pakistan.

Mirpuris are no ordinary migrants. They are in fact the pioneers in exploitation of their erstwhile rulers *i.e.* the Englishmen. In Great Britain they have become owners of fairly large properties, and have even married English girls and have sent them to Mirpur to live. It is not uncommon in a village to find blonde children conversing with their dark cousins in fluent Punjabi.

This migration has brought about great prosperity to the countryside. The barren land which produces next to nothing is as good as gold in value. It is a mark of prestige for a Mirpuri to own a piece of land in his own village, and after collecting a fortune in U.K. he will come back and spend it on a worthless piece of land. Next in importance will be a house. No wonder that Mirpur villages are no conglomeration of mud and clay contraptions.

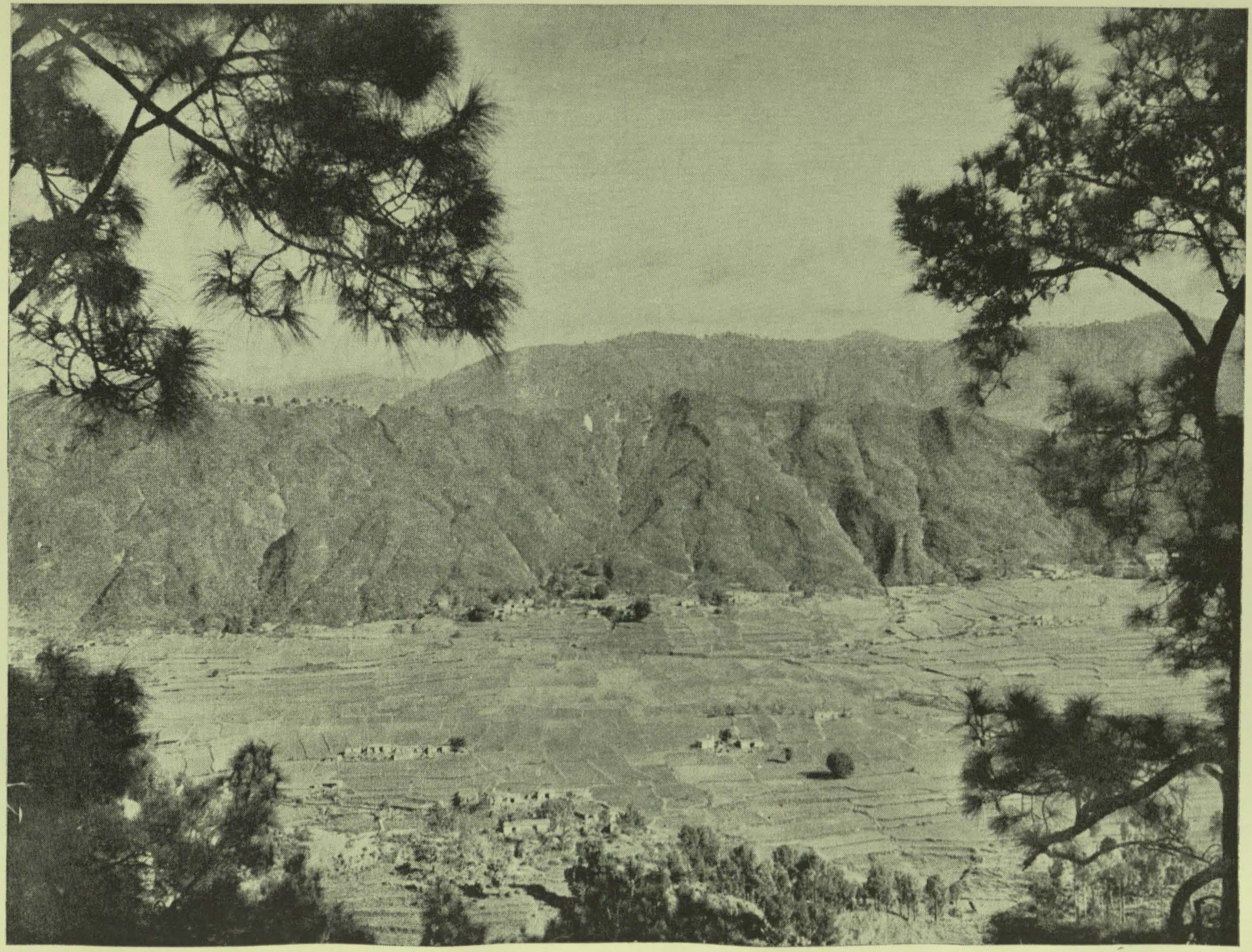
Lady luck has again smiled on the district, though in a completely unexpected manner. A fantastic amount of over twenty million rupees will pour into the area during the next ten years on the Mangla Dam project — the chief item on Indus Basin Replacement Scheme. Although the 35 miles long lake will submerge extensive area including the Mirpur town and shall result in dislocation of over one hundred thousand people, but the extent of prosperity and development which the area can rightly look forward to, is really hard to conceive at this stage.

There is one community, however, a small one though, which is highly dissatisfied with all these developments—the fishing community. Tangrot, at the confluence of Jhelum and Poonch rivers which provided the best 'Mahaser' fishing, will also be submerged in the deluge. Thus a scene of countless fishing yarns will be no more in a few years' time.

## SAMANI VALLEY

This broad valley between two mountain ranges is the Samani Valley. Its elevation is not much. So it is hot in summers but its winters are glorious. Cease Fire Line cuts across the hills in the right upper corner. The hills in the background on the right are in the Indian hands.

This picture was taken from the hill top. The valley was open like a book before us and the neatly laid fields and the dwarfed houses looked as if some children had been playing "houses" on the sand and had just left.



Samani Valley

## WOOLLIES ABOVE AND BELOW

Not all the valleys of Mirpur are as pretty or fertile as the "Samani Valley". Some, through centuries of neglect and over-grazing, have been rendered dismally infertile as the one shown in the picture on the opposite page. Here the sheep and the goats make their miserable living out of the scanty bush.



Woollies above and below

## MID-WINTER DAY'S DREAM

In sharp contrast to the hails and storms and snows of the high mountains of Muzaffarabad and Poonch Districts, the flat lands and riverain areas of Mirpur slumber in the warm winter sunshine. This picture was taken on a typical clear and sunny winter day.

But that was in 1957. This country slumbers no more. Nor do the birds. The heaviest machinery this side of Suez is now at work day and night within hearing distance of where the picture was once taken. The construction of Mangla Dam has started.



Mid-Winter Day's Dream

## BAKARWALS

A regular visitor to the hills can never miss meeting the Bakarwals; the most picturesque and interesting segment of Azad Kashmir's Population.

The word "Bakarwal" means one who keeps goats. The Bakarwals do keep goats but that does not seem to be their real occupation. Their real business is weather-chasing. Between the high lands of Skardu and Gilgit and the plains of the Punjab they are always going up and down along the Neelam in search of fine weather. No wonder that they are the healthiest and the prettiest people you can ever see.

Bakarwals are the elite of the nomads. Passing through rich pastures all along their journey and feasting their eyes on exquisite scenery, they have evolved into a happy and easy-going group of people.

The progress of a Bakarwal caravan is a treat to watch. They break camp very early in the morning. The tents are dismantled. The fires are quickly put out. The provisions, utensils, and beddings are all loaded on mules. The chickens are tied with the strings on top of everything. Mothers place the infants on their backs in cloth bags. The caravan is now ready to move. The women folk, children, and old members of the group travel with the mules. The young men follow the herds which move along side grazing all day long on the slopes. Just before mid-day when the sun gets strong, a site, long familiar, is selected and the Camp is set up for the remaining part of the day. The mules are set free to graze. The old women go collecting the firewood and the young girls to gather hay for the mules. The house-wife gets busy with the cooking. The children of course have plenty of time and space to have all the fun they want. Male members come down with the herd at about sun-set after a hard day of hiking. For quite some time after dark, the whole riverside is aflame with their camp fires and echo with the barkings of their dogs and squeals of their children—till gradually the fires go out and the Bakarwals, young and old, pass into a care-free sleep.

They travel in fairly large groups of families and never create a problem for the settled population. The women folk whose beauty bursts out of their dirty, dull, and formless clothes, do not cover their faces or shy away from strangers. In fact they are as much interested in people as the people are interested in them. On the whole the Bakarwals are a loveable bunch of people who provide a touch of drama and romance to the otherwise tranquil scene of Azad Kashmir.

But how long? Not much I suppose. Pakistan Government has banned the entry of goats into its territory. Azad Kashmir Government is thinking on simillar lines. If the goats go, the "Bakarwals" go with them. How colourless and empty, alas, will be those hills and dales without them.

## DOWNWARD JOURNEY

It is the end of July, and time to break camp at the 13,000 ft. site and move down. Here the terrain is absolutely rocky and pastures scarce so the families spread out.

In the picture on the opposite page a Bakarwal family is shown moving down. The lady of the house with three children is leading the family mule. The head of the family is somewhere near moving along the slope with the goats.

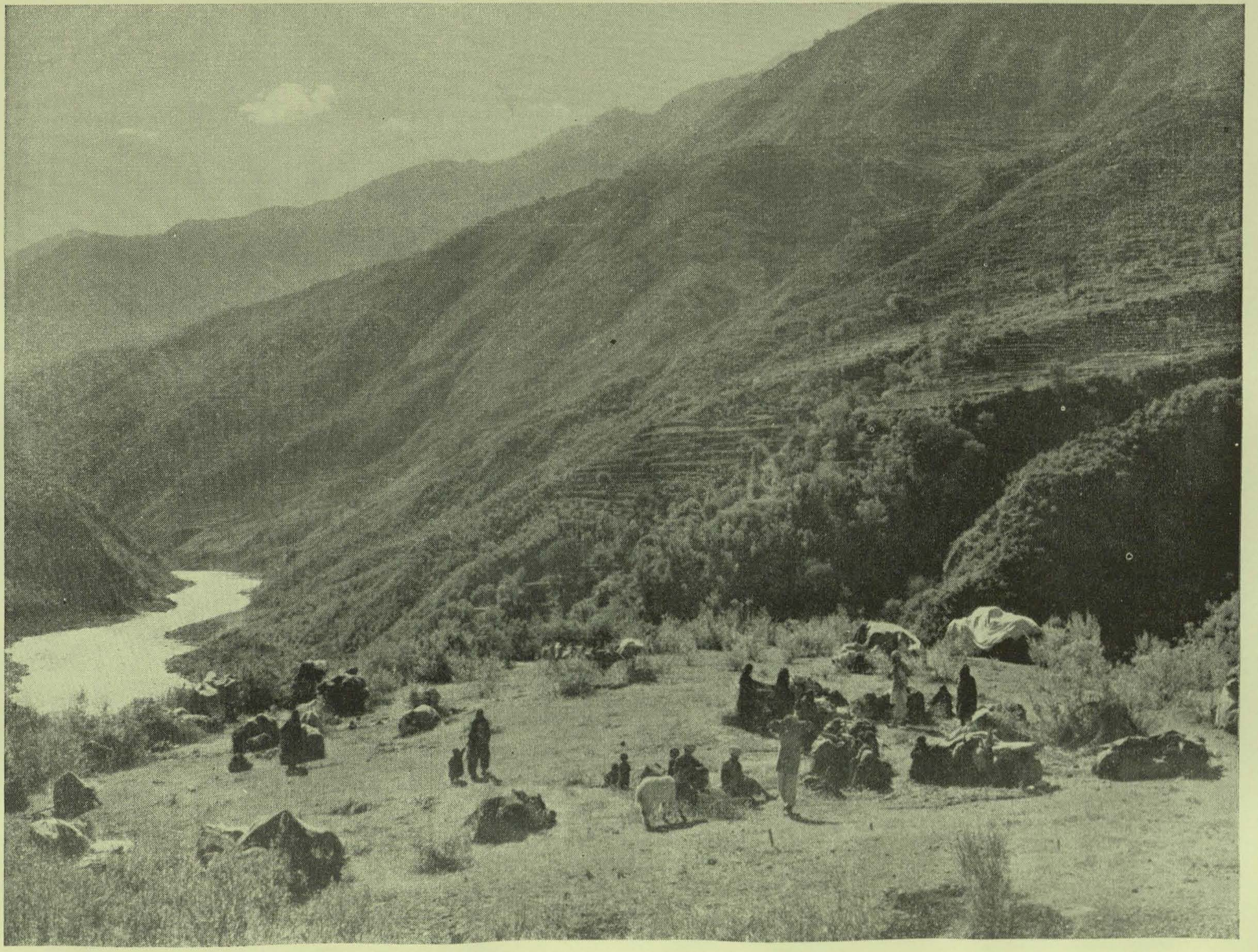


Downward Journey

## THE ENCAMPMENT

Whenever you find a clear patch along the familiar Bakarwal route with deserted fire-places and dried refuse of the goats and the sheep you know it is a Bakarwal camp site. By a habit formed over centuries of movement, families occupy a series of long familiar sites on their up and down journeys. At every camp it is like home-coming with association of a birth or a death or some other homely event. Only that instead of one home they have about a hundred homes.

Here a site has just been occupied. The mules have been unloaded and let off to graze. The human beings are having a brief respite and are drying their perspiration before starting on the routine of setting up of a home.



The Encampment

## THE FEAST

In another nearby encampment, it is an eventful day. Their Pir (the spiritual guide, who is mobile like them, and divides his days over various camps to dispense divinity) is visiting. The women are happily busy preparing a grand feast over an open fire. As many as seven different dishes are being cooked. The Pir must have a treat which should surpass any which he had in the neighbouring encampment, even if the whole fortune is expended in the bargain.



The Feast

## A PROUD MOTHER

A pretty, proud, healthy and bejewelled Bakarwal mother displays her equally healthy and cheerful ware.

She does not know it, but I cheated her in taking this picture, much to my regrets. Only those who have tried know how difficult it is to take a picture of village women in our country. As soon as they realise what is happening, they freeze, and nothing can unfreeze them. My wife had come with me to help me with the Bakarwal women on this venture. She joined them and chatted with them and put them at ease. She then admired the child. The mother felt so proud. I suggested a picture of the boy. In her simplicity she thought only the boy would come in the picture and was herself completely at ease.

The result justified the subterfuge.



A Proud Mother

## THE VEXED CHILD

At a request for another pose, the child gets vexed and whimpers unashamedly much to the frank amusement of the mother. The picture, however, provides a study in contrast; the child vexed and fretful, the mother amused and happy.



The Vexed Child

## THREE BAKARWAL MAIDENS

I spotted these three Bakarwal Maidens near their camp when they were on their way to collect hay for the mules. Seeing me coming out of my car and getting ready with the camera, they ran for shelter, but when they saw my wife, they were reassured and willingly came to us and engaged in conversation. Being unmarried they were properly modest, and shyly posed for me carefully hiding the vulnerable areas. They, however, looked into the camera with unconcealed curiosity as they had seen one probably for the first time.



Three Bakarwal Maidens

## ALL EGGS IN ONE BASKET

The Bakarwals are intelligent enough not to put all their eggs in one basket, but sometimes they can't help it. Here the whole family fortune is being led on to a very precarious bridge across river Neelam. The owner is anxiously watching the progress from down below (left hand corner) obviously with his heart in his mouth.



All Eggs in One Basket

# LEEPA VALLEY

The valley of Leepa could be likened to paradise—if only it were not very much harder to attain.

The Cease Fire Line has cut across its natural outlets with the result that an extremely difficult route had to be found to link it with Muzaffarabad. Branching off from Jhelum Valley Road at a point 32 miles from Muzaffarabad (towards Srinagar) you cross a foot bridge and walk for two days to reach Leepa. The nightly rest that you get in between at village Reshan (that half-way place) you don't remember because you fall dead asleep as soon as you hit the bed and are aware of your surroundings as much as a dead man in his grave.

One of our companions who claimed he would not be able to get a wink of sleep if something was not done about the bugs in the 'Charpoy' and spent quite some time in vigorously beating the poor old thing with a strong stick, slept like a log and was horrified to find on awakening next morning that an army of bugs was marching back from his bed to their homes in the ceiling via the ground and the wall.

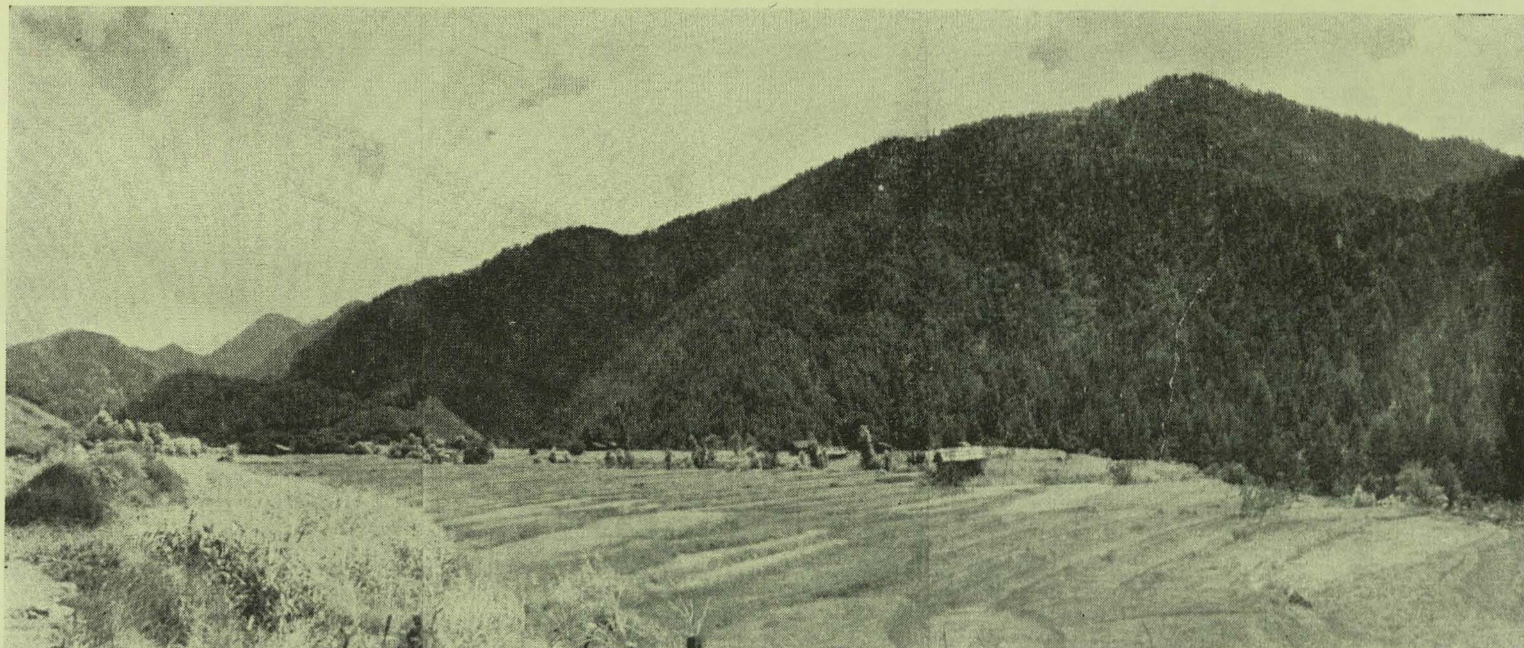
"How did they get here?" he inquired incredulously.

"Sir" explained Abdullah, the centurion Headman of Reshan, who was playing official host to us, with a twinkle in his eyes, "As soon as it is dark, the bugs come out of the deep slumber, crane out their necks and look around. When they spot or smell or feel (whatever it is) a prey underneath, they, in order to save time and energy, close their eyes, and let themselves go."

The track to Leepa starts at a point at about 2,000 ft. above sea level, goes up to 10,000 feet and again comes down to 5,000 feet, which is the average elevation of Leepa valley. But this description does not really present a correct picture of the rigours enroute. When you ascend or descend the slopes, it is not really always going up or going down. The route moves like a swing to circumvent the natural impediments in the way. To reach a point which is only 500 yards straight in front you turn and go down for about 2 miles and then go up the same distance because a mountain stream has to be crossed. This pointless waste of energy becomes exasperating as the day advances.

Some portions of the route, particularly the stretch between Reshan village to Reshan Gali, are so steep that the track goes zig zag to soften the gradient. Even then your knees hit your chin when you go up. Going down is no easier. After a little while you find your knees trembling violently under you, and you have the terrible temptation of letting yourself go and complete the journey on the run. The only snag is that you might stumble and break your neck in the bargain. We tried this on our return trip in sheer desperation and were lucky not only in coming out whole, but also creating a record. We practically rolled down the slope in 45 minutes instead of a normal $1\frac{1}{2}$ hours.

All these hardships are, however, forgotten once you step into the Valley. Vistas of terrace upon terrace of fertile fields walled in by lush green pine covered slopes, open out before you. Huge walnut trees scattered all over in small clusters enhance the beauty of the landscape. Music of rushing streams is heard wherever you go. You feel as if you have entered Paradise itself—although the hard way.



Leepa Valley

# WEEDING

It does not need much explaining what the two pious looking men in this picture are engaged in. They are weeding out their maize crop. But they are doing something more than the simple operation. They are giving a hand in disturbing the balance of nature in the hills.

In the mountains so terribly steep, the land for cultivation is necessarily limited. On the other hand, population presses on. After the flat patches, people turn to slopes. Every year trees are felled, slopes are cleared and levelled and brought under plough. The rain water rushes in torrents over uneven field and in the very first season the top soil goes down the drain. The net result is a measly addition to the output of a farmer, but, without his knowing it, he has contributed his share to the mischief. Cumulative effect of this process is that the natural checks on the flow of water are removed. It rushes down in torrents every year carrying millions of tons of soil with it which is spread in thick layers on the river beds in the plains which are being elevated every year. Thus not only more water rushes down at a given time, the capacity of the river to carry it is also reduced and we have floods every year in the plains.

The problem of silt poses a great threat to the biggest single project of the Indus Basin Replacement Works *i.e.*, the Mangla Dam. It is estimated that the Mangla Lake, to be built at a cost of over Rs. 2,00,000,000 will be silted up in a period of seventy-five to hundred years.

Engineers and planners are preparing elaborate schemes of afforestation to reduce the amount of silt and extend Mangla Lake's life, but the damage caused over centuries is not repaired in years.

If someone was to tell all this to the two pious men busy in their field on the way to Leepa, they would only shake their beards, say "tut" "tut", nod to each other knowingly, and keep quiet so as not to offend a mentally deranged person.

The slopes in the background were one time game reserve of the Maharaja and hummed with wild life. Now it supports only wild bear and a chance golden pheasant.

The rich pine forest cannot be fully exploited on account of transport difficulties created by the War. The problems and cost of transport break one's heart. On our journey we saw the timber being transported on the route on which we found it extremely difficult to carry our own weight. The logs are made into beams of manageable size, and transported on human or mules' back. One man takes two days to carry one beam to the main road. A mule can carry two but in a manner which is inhuman and in the long run expensive. Two long beams are tied on to the mule, one on each side. Whether it is going up or down, the beams repeatedly hammer at the head of the poor animal at every step when it jerks forward. The constant bang, bang, 8 hours a day, and 30 days in a month, prove too much even for the mules and they invariably go mad, so we were told, after two or three seasons of hauling timber.



Weeding

## FIRST FRIEND

Starting before day-break from Naili bridge, we reached Reshan Village, the midway place on way to Leepa, in the afternoon so tired that we had no other wish but to lay down and sleep endlessly. But there was no place where we could go and spend the night. The village, a cluster of weather-beaten, old, wooden houses, did not have any public place. The streets of the village at that time of the day were absolutely deserted and not a soul was visible anywhere. But our arrival had obviously created quite a stir inside the dark mysteries of the houses. There were muffled shouts and excited whispers. Big brown eyes set in pink flesh could be seen peering out of holes of the old and creaking doors and windows. After a suspenseful moment we found a little, angel-faced, girl shyly inching her way towards us. She turned out to be a very curious and friendly child and posed for photographs readily. I was chatting with her amiably when suddenly the door of a nearby house opened violently and a woman, covered entirely in dull black, leaned out and shouted for the girl in panic. She waved frantically to the girl to come back. She turned back reluctantly and was not completely inside the house when she was seized upon and quickly dragged in as if she had been retrieved from the devil himself.

Our amusement on this little drama had not subsided when, from nowhere, an apparition appeared which, with a crooked back, a flowing white beard, a white head, white eyebrows, and clad in white loose robes, looked the very picture of "Khawja Khizer". He was Pir Abdullah, the centurion 'Headman' of Reshan. Soon the communication of the hills was set in motion and relays of shouts conveyed the message to all and sundry working in the distant hills. Presently a swarm of people gathered around and got busy in making us comfortable in the school building which was hurriedly opened and cleaned and set for us to spend the night.

Reshan is important in the sense that it is the first real Kashmiri Village on the way. The flat roof and the mud walls of the "Gujar Bandis" give place to wooden houses with pointed roofs, the ruddy and rough human features to the pink complexion and delicately cut 'Kashmir' face, and the "Pahari" or the hill dialect to the 'Kashmiri' language.

The overnight stay at 'Reshan' helped in my striking a lasting friendship with Pir Abdullah and the little girl you see on the opposite page. I was, therefore, gravely concerned when one day during the ensuing winters I heard that a huge avalanche from the Gali descended upon the village during the night and carried a number of houses in its wake. I was, however, relieved to know that although many lives were lost, my two friends survived the tragedy.

The village produces the whitest and the sweetest honey. A bottle a season sent regularly by Pir Abdullah serves as a sweet memory of my visit to Reshan and a reminder of our friendship.



First Friend

## A TYPICAL VILLAGE

Compact villages in the hills are quite uncommon. Usually a peasant builds a small hamlet within his small farm. Thus a village exists on the revenue records only. On the ground it means an endless chain of houses and hamlets scattered all over. At dark nights little lamps burning in the houses look like continuation of the sky with stars twinkling here and there.

This pattern, however, slightly changes in Leepa Valley. The land is comparatively flat and fertile and some community life is, therefore, possible. This is how a village looks like. The houses which are built entirely of wood are typical Kashmiri houses like one finds in the valley. These houses which have two and sometime three stories are so contrived that though not a nail or a bolt or a nut is used in the construction, yet not a drop of water escapes through, inspite of heavy rain and snowfall. The land is so valuable that cultivation is done right upto the doorstep. The houses are often surrounded by huge walnut trees which provide substantial cash to the families.

Wild bear abound in the surrounding forests. When maize crop ripens, they descend from the hills in the night and go on the rampage. The villagers fix empty tin cans with the trees and connect them with the houses with strings. At night whenever any member of the house wakes up, he or she pulls at the string and shakes the tin can creating an awful noise which scares away the bear. The din thus caused all over the valley for a month or so every night is terrific.



A Typical Village

## A MILK WOMAN

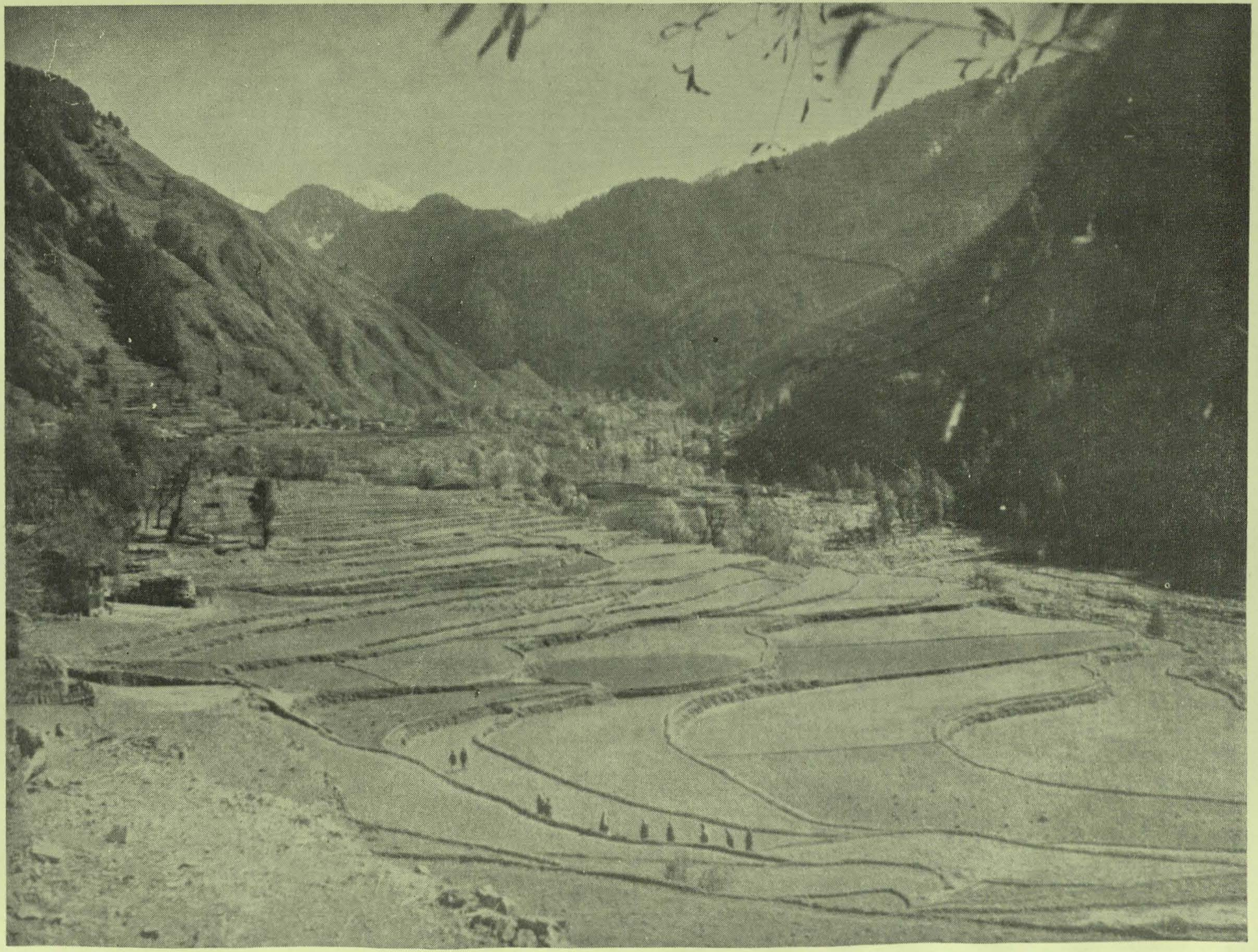
A stout peasant woman has just milked the cows in the pastures and is carrying the milk to the house. She is completely uninhibited and looks into the camera with highly amused and curious eyes. The rich and long growth of her hair is something to be seen. The womenfolk in these parts use butter for hair oil. It might stink, but it produces the desired result.



A Milk Woman

## TERRACES FOR PADDY

The paddy had just been reaped ans the terraces are laid bare. They will be watered and ploughed and prepared for the next crop now.



Terraces for Paddy

## RICE HUSKING MILL

The main crop of the valley is rice, which is also the staple diet of the people. Here you see a rice husking mill which is operated by water. The rushing water turns the wheel which, at frequent intervals, releases a pole with a big wooden pin attached to its end. The pin strikes at the paddy in a hole which is husked by constant beating.

A chain of such crudely built mills is strung all along the stream. They remain busy night and day to complete all the husking before the winter snowfall by which time the inhabitants like to withdraw into the smoky corners of their dark houses for winter hibernation.



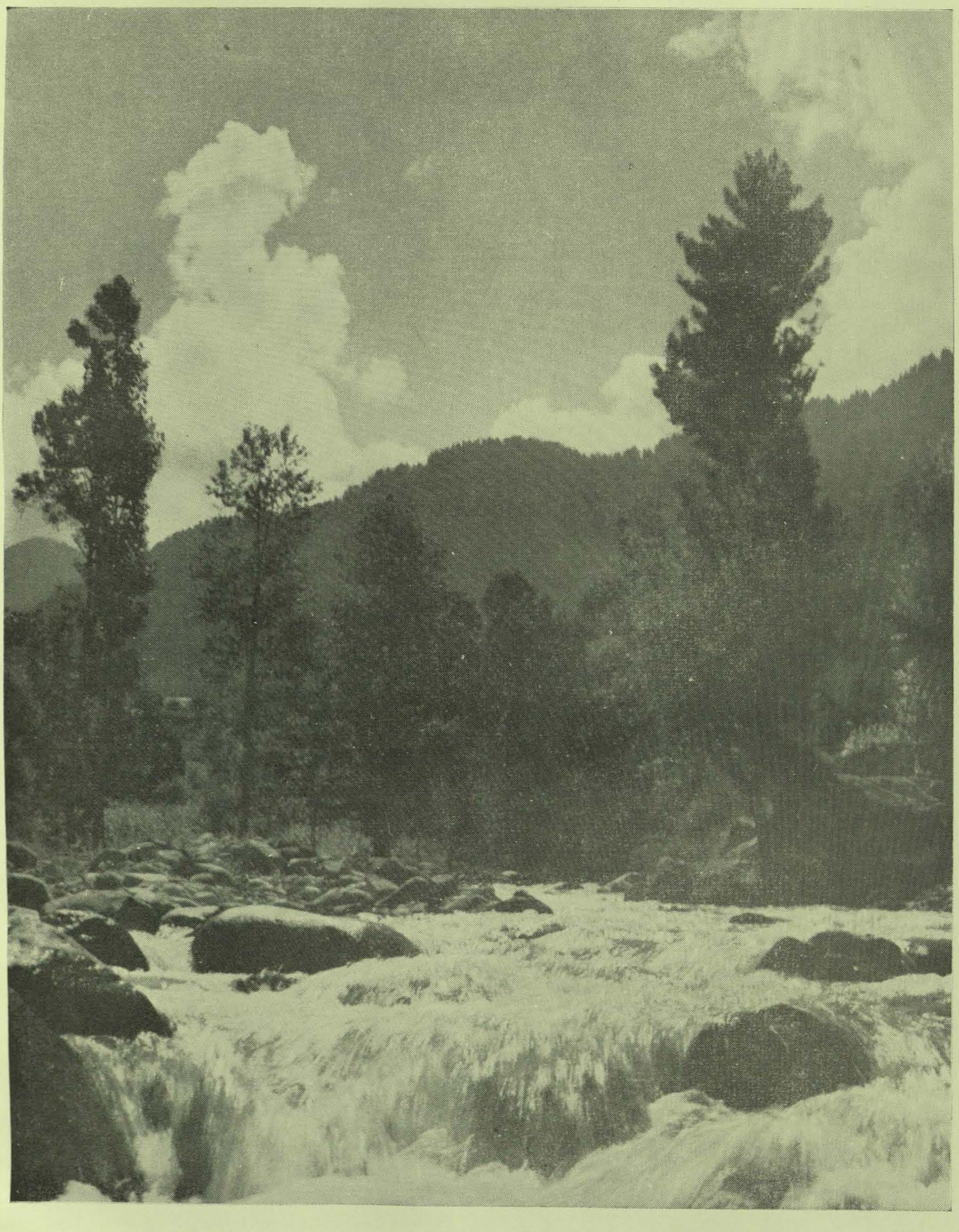
Rice Husking Mill

## QAZI NAG

Qazi Nag is probably the most musical mountain stream which I heard anywhere. It traverses the entire length of the valley to finally join the Neelam at Tethwal which is in the Indian hands. Wherever you go in the valley you can hear it's music — only it's pitch is high or low depending on how far you are from it.

Rushing through stately pines, tall maize crop, and romantic houses, it tumbles over boulders and stones in endless crescendos. The churning water is a mass of white foam and froth which from a distance gives it the appearance of a stream of milk rather than of water.

It passes by the forest rest-house where we were camping during our visit. It was a moonlit night and although we were very tired, we were drawn to the stream's side as if by a magical force. For a long time we sat on the boulders which you see in the picture, and listened to its unending music. The simple villagers had already withdrawn into their houses and except for an occasional silvery laughter or a cry of a lone child or the barking of a distant dog, a complete peace had descended on the valley. The breeze rustling through the pines, whispered, and sighed, and caused an unexplained melancholy within us. Soon the moon went behind the mountains. The surroundings suddenly became dark and sinister and the fear of the wild bears who, as we had been alerted, go on rampage during the night, became real. We reluctantly returned to our rooms for a welcome sleep.



Qazi Nag

## THE SMILING FACE OF AZAD KASHMIR

I spotted the girl on the opposite page on my return journey from Leepa. She was obviously on her way to the fields for the day's work. Seeing us pass she left the track in customary deference to "Important" visitors and stood behind a bush to watch us. When asked to come out and meet us, she turned absolutely red in the face and using her work basket as a shield to cover herself as much as possible, she advanced hesitatingly. She had not seen a camera before, and though she was frankly curious at the goings—on around her, yet the inborn modesty of a village girl made her very self-conscious. She shrank from the unashamedly admiring eyes of so many strange people including, of course, the author.

I was finding it difficult to catch her true personality in the picture. No cajoling or encouragement seemed to work. The time honoured devices of "smile please", "hold on" and "say cheese" do not work with a girl in the East. At the spur of the moment I asked her "Is it your wedding day that you are bedecked with all this pretty jewellery?" At this she burst out into a most gainful and heart-warming smile and I clicked the camera. Her large brown eyes popped out in sheer amazement at the flash and the noise. You can see it in the picture.

This is not just a face. This, in fact, symbolizes Azad Kashmir itself—natural, unspoiled, adolescent, marvellously beautiful—and puzzled at the ways of the civilized world.



The Smiling Face of Azad Kashmir

## LUNCH FOR PAPA

Not all the lasses of Leepa are prosperous and decorated, as the rags of this poor peasant girl will show. But they are all charming and dignified. Though poor, yet she did not betray any signs of misery or degradation which are associated with poverty.

She carried papa's lunch who was busy working in the fields.



Lunch for Papa

# THE LUCKY ESCAPE

It seems appropriate to end this book with the picture on the opposite page.

It is the last picture taken on my trips to the countryside in Azad Kashmir, and thus it signifies the end of a glorious chapter in my life. This is also the costliest picture of the entire lot in more than one sense. It cost the Forest Department of Azad Kashmir ten thousand rupees and could have cost me my life, but for the timely warning given by a Police Sentry.

It happened on my second and last visit to Leepa valley. This time I accompanied President Khurshid. The hut which is shown burning in the picture was only recently completed and we were its first occupants. That evening the local elders had played host to us. It was a crisp and cold November evening. During the meal Mr. Khurshid suggested that we have a bonfire, but it was too late to do anything about it, and, much to his disappointment, the idea was dropped.

He was, however, not to be disappointed for long. After the meal was over, elders took leave with usual courtesies and we sat down before the log fire to chat quite far into the night. We finally broke up at about midnight and, putting the last logs into the fire crept into our waiting beds. I almost immediately fell into a deep slumber. Not long after, however, I heard the Sentry banging loudly at the door of my room with rifle butt and shouting "Sir, come out quick, the hut is on fire". It took me some time to focus my sleepy mind on the urgency of the event. When I came out (in my pyjamas) I found the roof of the hut burning furiously. The fire was spreading with alarming rapidity. Till then I had not known that Mr. Khurshid was a heavy sleeper. We were all banging at his door and shouting, but he would not listen. Finally he asked in irritation "What is it?"

"The hut is on fire" I shouted.

"Then What! why does not somebody put it out" was his laconic answer.

We crashed into his room and literally pulled him out.

"Oh my God, we were soon going to be roasted" he gasped when he saw the flames.

We were within two miles of Cease-Fire-Line and my first suspicion was of a sabotage by the enemy. In the powerful glow we were all plum targets for the enemy snipers.

A quick probe, however, revealed that the fire had spread from the chimney, obviously because of defective construction. The fire travelled so fast, that it was useless to do anything about it. When reassured as to the cause as well as futility of any attempt to extinguish it, we did really enjoy the warmth of the expensive glow. A little while later, however, the whole structure caved in and huge sparks spiralled up into the sky. The hut was situated on the fringes of the forest. One or two nearby trees caught fire, but luckily there was no breeze and the fire did not spread to the forest.

Incidently Mr. Khurshid is temperamentally against posting of armed sentry at his camp. That night too, on seeing the Sentry standing in the cold outside, he had protested and wanted him to be removed but I resisted. When the hut burned, I told him, not without a touch of malice, "There! but for that Sentry, we go up in fire and smoke".



The Lucky Escape

Rao A. Rashid was born in a small village in the Punjab in 1926. He was educated at the Muslim University, Aligarh, from where he graduated in Law and obtained Master's degree in Economics in 1948.



After teaching economics for over two years, he entered the POLICE SERVICE OF PAKISTAN in 1951, through a competitive examination and has served in all parts of the country during the last 12 years. In 1957 he was selected to be the Inspector General of Police of Azad Kashmir, at a young age of 31. He served in that capacity for $3\frac{1}{2}$ years and was awarded the first Azad Kashmir President's Police Medal for bringing about spectacular improvements in Police organization there.

The author is a real aesthete. He is a keen sportsman, a lover of nature, and a good traveller. He also dabbles in painting and photography. Lately he has taken to writing. In the last mentioned, we hope, he has finally found an avenue for his creative urge, and we rightly look forward to see many more books from him based on his rich experience.

*Publishers*